

# GOIN' ON FOURTEEN

IRVIN S. COBB

S. V. Weaver.











Goin' on Fourteen

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# BY IRVIN S. COBB

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## FICTION

GOIN' ON FOURTEEN  
SNAKE DOCTOR  
J. POINDEXTER, COLORED  
SUNDRY ACCOUNTS  
FROM PLACE TO PLACE  
THOSE TIMES AND THESE  
LOCAL COLOR  
OLD JUDGE PRIEST  
BACK HOME  
THE ESCAPE OF MR. TRIMM  
FIBBLE D.D.

## WIT AND HUMOR

### *Cobb's America Guyed Books*

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KENTUCKY	KANSAS

A LAUGH A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY  
A PLEA FOR OLD CAP COLLIER  
ONE THIRD OFF  
THE ABANDONED FARMERS  
THE LIFE OF THE PARTY  
EATING IN TWO OR THREE LANGUAGES  
"OH WELL, YOU KNOW HOW WOMEN ARE!"  
"SPEAKING OF OPERATIONS—"  
EUROPE REVISED  
ROUGHING IT DE LUXE  
COBB'S BILL OF FARE  
COBB'S ANATOMY

## MISCELLANY

MYSELF TO DATE  
THE THUNDERS OF SILENCE  
THE GLORY OF THE COMING  
PATHS OF GLORY  
"SPEAKING OF PRUSSAINS—"

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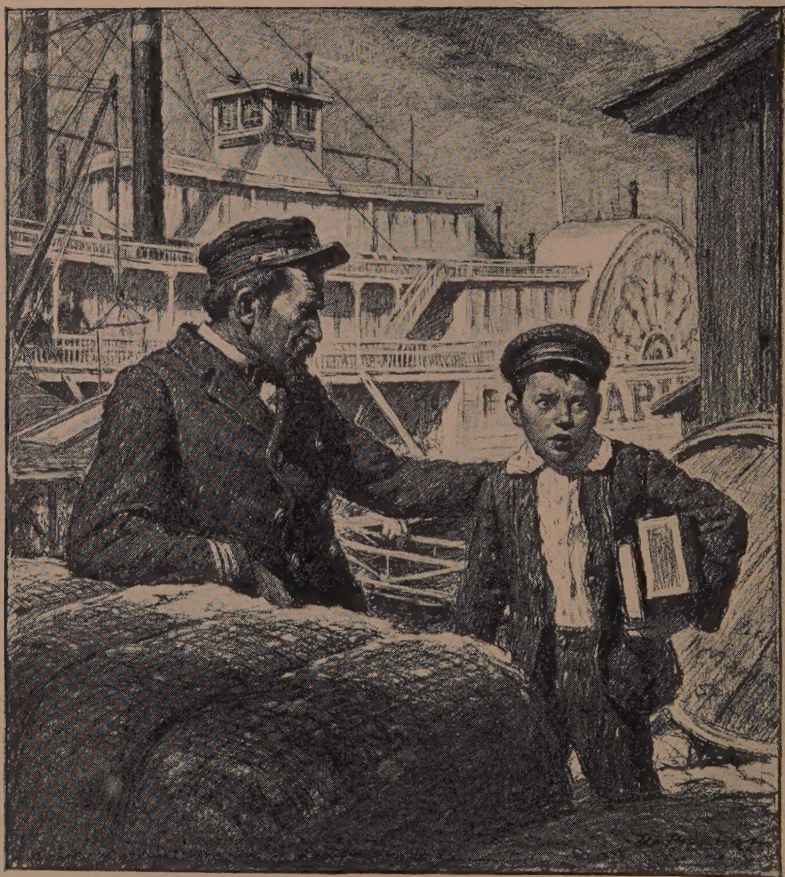
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*L. F. Weaver Jr.  
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B. F.*

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"BUT PLEASE, SUH, IF YOU DON'T MIND, I  
JUST REMEMBERED SOMETHIN' I FORGOT  
ABOUT."

# Goin' on Fourteen

BEING CROSS-SECTIONS OUT OF A YEAR  
IN THE LIFE OF AN AVERAGE BOY

by  
IRVIN S. COBB

*Illustrated by*  
WORTH BREHM

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GOIN' ON FOURTEEN

— A —

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DUDLEY ROBERTS, M.D.



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**Goin' on Fourteen**



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## *Chapter I*

### THE DAY AFTER A BIRTHDAY

**M**OM!"

There was no answer. Yet there she sat, in plain view through the open door and, beyond question, within easy earshot.

"Mom—oh, mom! Say, mom, lissen, please'm?"

"I heard you the first time."

"Wellum, you didn't say, 'Whut?' back to me."

A pause here to give the accused a chance to plead in her own defense. "Say, mom, why didn't you say 'Whut?' if you heard me?"

"I'm busy, that's why. What is it you want now? And don't call me 'mom.'"

Her tone was quite matter-of-fact, indeed almost was an annoyed tone. That special deference which on the day before had marked it was quite lacking. How prone were grown persons and, in particular, parents to forget or to ignore events of importance. The principal speaker fetched a little sigh and wriggled half out of bed.

"Mom—I mean mommer—I feel a little bit better now'n I did a while ago. I think maybe I could git up."

"How often must I keep on telling you not to keep on saying 'git?' There's no such word as 'git.'"

"Yessum, there is too such a word as 'git.' That feller up North some'r's that killed the President—the one that was President when I was prob'ly just a young child before I even couldn't remember much about it—his name was 'Gittow.' It wasn't 'Gettow.' It was 'Gittow.' Miss Ida Brazzell was tellin' about him killin' that President only just last week in hist'ry class and she said 'Gittow,' just as plain as anythin', mom. Don't you s'pose that her bein' a teacher in the Fifth grade she'd know, ef anybody did, ef there was such a word?"

Again no reply, but only an irritating silence.

"Mom, didn't you hear me whut I was sayin' to you a minute ago when you started in talkin' about somethin' else? I said I believed I felt well enough to git—get up. The achein' where I had it in my stomach is mighty near almost all gone. And my finger don't hurt so bad, neither. The hurtin' only just comes back to the cut place once't in a while."

"Oh, well, then, get up and dress yourself. But stay in the yard; don't go wandering off. If you were too sick to go back to school today—and I must say that for once in your life you really did seem to be sick—you're not well enough to leave the place. And, whatever you do, keep off that new acting bar of yours. If you start turning yourself

upside down again on that acting bar there's no telling how soon you'll be back in bed. Now, remember!"

"Yessum. Well, kin I have my new birthday knife back, then, that you took it away frum me yistiddy?"

"There you go again—if I've told you once I must have told you a hundred times that there's no such a word as 'kin,' either. The word is 'can.' "

"Yessum, there is such a word as 'kin.' Lissen, mom, I kin prove it to you. How about 'kin-folks,' mom? You don't say 'can-folks,' do you? You say 'kin-folks,' just like that—don't you?"

"That's because it's spelled that way. Nobody but darkies and common people pronounce a word differently from the way it is spelled."

"Oh, yessum, they do, too. There's grandpa. You wouldn't call him common people, would you? He always says 'Kintucky,' even when he's makin' a speech—I've heard him—and yet you don't spell it like that—you spell it 'K-e-n-t-u-c-k-y.' And even you, mom, you do the same thing sometimes. When you git excited or somethin' you say 'Nostcha thing' when you mean 'No such of a thing,' and \_\_\_\_\_,"

"Nostcha thing!"

"Why, mom, you just took and said it yourself. I said to you that you said it sometimes and you went to say you didn't—and you did!"

The pestered woman rose up from where she sat and stepped to the door. Voice and manner



betokened a patience taxed almost to the breaking point.

"For Heaven's sake, John C. Calhoun Custer Junior, get up and put your clothes on and go 'long outdoors and give me a little peace! I declare I'm outdone with you. I don't know which is worse—having you asking a million questions a day, the way you used to do, or arguing by the hour, the way you do now. To be forever arguing with older persons over something they don't know anything about is not becoming in children."

"Yessum. But say, mom, you ain't children any more ef you're thirteen, goin' on fourteen—are you?"

His mother had turned away. The boy raised his voice, sending it after her retiring form:

"Mom, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Oh, nothin'." In this cross-maze of controversy one of the main issues was being lost sight of. "Mom, can't I please'm have my new knife back?"

"No, you can't have it back. That knife was given to you to enjoy and not to be cutting your fingers off with. I'm not forgetting the fright you gave me yesterday when you came running in with your hand all covered with blood. I told you then, when I took it away from you, and I tell you now—and let it be the last time—that I'm not going to trust you with that knife again until you've learned how to use it properly without hurting yourself. For the life of me I don't know why your father,

when he was picking out a knife for you, should have picked out such a sharp one."

"But, mom, how'm I ever goin' to learn how to use it ef you don't let me have it back, so's I kin learn how to use it? You can't enjoy a knife much, I must say, ef somebody else has went and put it away and won't even let you have it to enjoy yourself with."

"John Custer, either you get up this minute and dress yourself or else you stay right where you are and keep quiet. If I hear another word out of you I'll scream. So make your choice, young man, and make it quick!"

There was finality in this utterly unreasonable woman's dictum. So the victim of her injustice made his choice. Under his breath he muttered to himself, as he fitted the buttons on the waistband of his "waist" into the buttonholes in the waistband of his "short pants."

Half an hour later he sat on the edge of the braced plank which confined the bed of sawdust beneath the new acting bar, with his morose face in his hands and his elbows on his knees; there he sat and reflected upon the impermanency of mortal pleasures. Only half an hour it had been and yet to him it seemed that an immensely long period of time must have passed since he came forth into the hot September sunshine. He had toured the yard, restlessly seeking occupation, and had found none.

Listlessly he had climbed up into the stable loft and still listlessly had presently descended. That dusty, hay-filled place which offered such possibili-

ties when visited in congenial company—which was by turns a robbers' cave, a desert island, a Redskins' camp, a kidnappers' den—had revealed itself now as a lonesome and comfortless chamber, a fit abode for spiders and mice and for the stupid pigeons, booming and strutting in their peaked quarters under the gables. He had made the rounds of the woodshed, the henhouse, the shed under which the cow stood to be milked in bad weather; all was monotony thrice compounded.

Upon a cross timber of the alley fence he came upon a disquieting spectacle. Here, in the week previous, he had placed a preserve jar snugly full of plump earthworms. It was of general belief in the circles in which he moved that if you thus exposed captive worms for a suitable period to the action of the sun's rays they were resolved into "snake oil," and then, if with this magic property you anointed your limbs and body, you grew incredibly limber in all your joints and shortly had mastery of every known feat of contortion. By common accounting, the boneless wonders and human frogs seen in circuses acquired and maintained their extraordinary suppleness through precisely these treatments.

But either these worms had been glassed for too long or for not long enough. He felt that he would not care to remove the screwed-on top of the canister, now or ever. Merely a look at the liquefying contents was sufficient to dissuade him from any lingering ambitions to be a human frog. It was more than sufficient. Anyhow, it had been several

days since he had favorably considered such a career; more recently, the life of an Indian scout had appealed to him. He had also thought somewhat of the advantages of railroading, with particular reference to a brakeman's job. He gagged, as hastily he withdrew from the vicinity of the entombed horrors.

Heretofore he recalled no instance when his stomach had betrayed such squeamishness. Suddenly he seemed much enfeebled, in flagging health and greatly indisposed. Maybe his late rally had been but a temporary thing; maybe soon he would relapse into a definitely failing state.

But after a little he was slightly better, that is to say, physically. Spiritually he continued at a low ebb. It hardly seemed possible that this body of his had been the earthly tenement, twenty-four hours before, of a soul so buoyant.

For yesterday, up to a certain hour, had been such a full and glorious day, such a whopper and a jim-dandy of a day. But today, how flat, stale and unprofitable!

Hunched on the narrow coping of the sawdust bed, he viewed the one which was past in the uninspiring light of the one which was present, and by contrast was made to realize the hollowness of existence. Without being able to put tongue to the exact words which described the situation, he nevertheless felt the force of a majestic truth, voiced centuries before him and by a much older philosopher, to the effect that expectation is more precious than gratification. In short, Master Custer

was bored. Not alone was he bored, but likewise he was introspective; or at least he was as introspective as persons of his age ever are.

Great days, he pessimistically reflected, had a way of going to pieces on a fellow. Take Christmas Day, now. The bottom always seemed to fall right out of it along about four or five o'clock in the evening. And birthdays, it would appear, likewise belied the anticipations with which a buoyant optimism wreathed them on the eve of their occurrence. But it did seem as though a fellow's thirteenth birthday, marking his advent into matured estate, should be different. It just naturally ought to be. In prospect it had loomed as a thing so tremendously significant. Two days before he had said to himself, marveling at the impending transformation: "Tonight, when I go to bed I'll still be only just twelve years old. But in the mornin' when I wake up I'll be thirteen, goin' on fourteen—*hod zickertee!*"

Lo, and the miracle had come to pass and already disillusionment and a deep debility possessed him. True, the anniversary had been auspiciously launched. There were, to begin with, presents—this acting bar, and that knife and a pair of solid silver cuff buttons—cuff buttons such as men wore, with a design of horses' heads raised on their surfaces, and with these last a promise that his next lot of "waists" should be finished, not with the turned-back wristbands of small boydom but with those desirable barrel-shaped terminals such as his father and other smartly dressed male adults had

at their sleeve ends. Also, he had been accorded special and extraordinary considerations in honor of the day. He had not been required to go to school for either session; the other members of the household uniformly had behaved with a fine graciousness toward him, and at dinner, to which he had been permitted to invite certain chosen guests, the dishes were of his own choosing.

Yet all the time disaster had been lurking around the corner. First there had befallen the affair of the gashed forefinger. That wasn't so bad, though, once the first shock was over; carrying the maimed hand in bandages more than atoned for the pain. He had borne himself as some wounded warrior might, repeatedly directing attention to the fact that he hadn't cried "even when all that there blood come agushin' out in streams." The inference was that he had spilled quarts of the precious fluid. But then, in midflight of the resumed festival, he had become acutely unwell; a combination of lemonade, three helpings of peach shortcake with whipped cream and, somewhat later, two large raw cucumbers eaten without salt or pepper, on a dare, undoubtedly had something to do with this afflicting denouement.

He had been put to bed and dosed copiously; he had remained in bed, strangely languid and, what was stranger still, without appetite, until this following day was well advanced. And now that he was up, he might, he reflected, just as well be down in bed again for all the good that getting up had brought him. For the new acting bar was for-



bidden, its polished oaken shaft seeming to mock him where it shone between its newly planted up-rights above his despondent head, and the new knife was in other custody and likely to remain so indefinitely, and those pledged blouses, which the new buttons were to adorn and set off with so mannish a touch, hadn't even been fashioned and might not be for months yet. And it was probably only a little while after two o'clock and school wouldn't let out until four—a stark hour and a half, at the very least; and even when it did let out the freedom of the highways would to him be denied. What was the use of growing up if everything had to go and turn out this-a-way?

He settled his gloomy face deeper into the chin-rest of his cupped palms.

“Oh, shuckin's,” he said, addressing void and untenanted space. “Oh, shuckin's, daggone it!” Life was very empty.



## CHAPTER II

### A LADY CAT GOES ON A JOURNEY

THERE were small, inconsequential stirrings and noises going on—chimney-swifts circling and twittering overhead, already concerned with plans for a fall emigration that still was weeks distant; locusts, up in the cottonwoods, like so many little green locksmiths, filing imaginary keys to fit imaginary keyholes; a creak of wheels in the alley, growing more distant and fainter; the rich soprano of Aunt Mallie, the cook, softened for a crooned rendition of her favorite hymn. “I’m a’inchin’ along lak a po’ inch worm”; the querulous gabbling of hens drowsing in the shade; the *Buck-a-tuck-a-too* of a lordly cock bird in his cote under the stable rafters; but these sounds served to accent the silence rather than to interrupt it. In none of them was there novelty or prospect of diversion.

A new actress appeared upon the scene, to wit, a lean and slinky black lady cat, stepping daintily from picket to picket along the top of the side fence. She dropped lightly to the earth near where the misanthrope was squatted. He bent a lack-luster eye at her approach; she exercised a long and nervous tail, but neither, by other signs, recognized the other’s presence. This cat was of the

type locally known as ash-cats. She had come into the neighborhood during the summer and, for reasons unfathomable, had adopted the Custer family. She was credited with high ratings as a mouse-catcher. However, her night-time habits were bad. If let to range, she would prowl under somebody's bedroom window and make social engagements, and if confined indoors she would tour the house and, in a harsh and unhappy voice, would break them. She skirted the vicinity of the sitter, then darted nimbly in back of him. A hollow tinkle as of light metalware being mauled about made him lift his head and look behind.

Against the hen-house was a barrel for food scraps. It was newly emptied and scraped—proof that old Mrs. Slop Johnson had today been making her weekly rounds of this part of town; probably it was the wheels of her departing wagon which he just now had heard. At the base of the barrel was one item either overlooked by her or intentionally discarded as being unsuitable for pigs. It was a rather slim, rather deep, tube-shaped tin which originally had contained salmon—he seemed to recall that canned salmon had figured in cold Sunday night's supper at the beginning of the week—and it was with this cylindrical object that the lady puss now busied herself.

She sniffed at the forward end, where the top had been cut across two ways and bent outward in an effect of a four-pointed star. She pawed at it, so that it rolled on its rounded sides. She inserted first one probing foreleg and then the other

in the circular bore of it. With her tail whipping in a brisk half-moon, she brought a lean muzzle repeatedly to the opening, but each time withdrew it before her face entirely was engulfed.

Mildly interested by this peculiar behavior on the part of a cat, the lone onlooker languidly rose and walked rearward and took up the can in his hands and peered down the blind tunnel of its interior. To the walls adhered shreds of fish and smears of rancid-smelling oil. At the bottom was quite a residue of the pinkish meat. He dropped the thing and immediately she pounced upon it again and resumed her strange behavior. For her the contents must have a great and intense fascination; still, she appeared loath to invade it with her head. Yet, if the spectator might judge, the orifice was amply large to admit her skull, and once the skull had entered the enclosed tidbits should be within easy reach. Goodness knew, that skinny old neck of hers was plenty long enough—like a giraffe's neck or somethin'. Then why didn't she shove on inside, since such was her ambition?

A partial solution of the puzzle flashed to him. On the occasion lately of a Sunday stroll in the country, his father had elucidated for him certain of the common mysteries of nature. The little lizards that throve so numerous in these parts turned green where they scuttled in the grass and turned back to gray when they raced along the rail fences; that was protective coloration. The partridge had plumage to match its feeding place in the weed stubbles. The fly had eyes all over his

body and needed them. There was a reason why a cat wore whiskers: when the whisker-ends grazed the inner edges of a hole, the wearer thereby had advice that this particular gap was too small for the passage of its body.

But as he viewed it, this cat craved not to insert her entire person in the salmon tin but merely her head and neck; whence, then, arose her hesitation? As he pondered this supplemental mystery, a remembrance of another and more recent lesson rose up in his mind. Only the day previous, in a birthday lecture, his mother had said to him that upon entering your teens you should take thought to do kindly and worthy deeds, to be gentle to all harmless wild things, to show consideration for your elders, most of all to help those who strove to help themselves. At the time, the outlined program had not greatly appealed to him; it had been his observation that while benevolent acts might be blessed they very rarely were followed by any thrilling outcome.

Even so, here was a concrete chance to test out the general plan of it, according to the maternal precept. This cat now was trying to help herself, wasn't she? All right, then, he would help her. He hurried into the house and when he returned brought with him a pair of buttonhole scissors borrowed from his mother's workbasket. In one of his pants pockets was a square of gingerbread lifted from a pantry shelf as he came through on his former journey. He had abstracted it as a matter of routine and habit, but somehow had

not wished to eat it. The phenomenon of his not wishing to eat it was one of the things which had made him fear his health must really be indifferent. It now was somewhat moist and crumbly but still intact.

He brought it forth and, stooping, tendered it to the lady cat, at the same time saying "Kitty, kitty, come on, nice old kitty," in an ingratiating manner. Tabby approached, using caution though, and smelled at the proffered delicacy; but it was a suspicious rather than a hungry smelling. Plainly, she did not care for gingerbread, either. But she lingered on for a brief space and she arched her gaunt spine and—possibly through surprise at evidences of friendliness from this unexpected quarter—she rumbled inside herself somewhere as he put forth a hand and stroked her along the back. Thus with one hand he stroked her and with the other, in quick snips, he sheared off her bristling whiskers close up to the lips. A curious bare-faced effect was produced, but the denuded creature seemed not to mind this. It might be she was tired of wearing mustaches, anyhow. Just as he had clipped away the last remaining long hair she backed out of detention and went to revisit her alluring find.

Then, at that very instant, the measured baritone symphonies in the pigeon-house changed to an alarmed fluttering and mooing. Perhaps a marauding rat was after the nestlings! If so, here was a fresh and a more congenial opportunity for performing one of those praiseworthy deeds. In his



new rôle he ran to climb the loft stairs. But when he arrived the verminous intruder, was there one, had vanished. The squabs all were present and accounted for and the parents had regained their accustomed calm. Deeply disappointed, the young paladin descended.

The lady cat was nowhere in sight. The can which so had intrigued her also had disappeared, but he failed to take note of this circumstance as moodily he reseated himself on the gunwale of the sawdust bed and became again quite the figure of a solitary and brooding melancholiac.

Tremendous events were impending, indeed already were occurring—events, too, of his own unwitting propulsion—and he in total ignorance of it all. Why, the very beginning of these matters was of a sort which would have lifted him out of his present low state, which would have vibrated him to his youthful marrows. Now this beginning was after this fashion:

The lady cat, as we know, repaired straightway to a designated tin receptacle. This time she pushed her barbered frontlet directly in, paying no heed that the indents of the aperture brushed both jowls, but promptly she sought to withdraw. Accounting for this attempted precaution, we may safely assume that instinct, in the absence of the informing antennae, gave her warning that all, perhaps, would not be so well with her.

Instinct was right; all was not well. The flanges of her jaws caught against the inner projections of the asterisked opening. In a quick flurry of mount-

ing panic she clawed with a forepaw at the smooth outer surface of the container, which was for her a grievous mistake, although under the circumstances as excusable one. The can turned left, two points, and, because of the conformation of its entryway, clamped itself as firmly upon her as though it had been an integral part of this cat to begin with.

In that fleeting breath of time all senses of dignity and self-restraint—and cats, in a natural state, have both dignity and poise—left her. She became a convulsed unbalanced thing. Emitting a yowl which was muffled at its source, she rose and arched in a mad bound, presenting the unique spectacle of a distorted snaky black body which terminated headlessly at one extremity in a tubular tin muzzle, and at the other in a tail swollen to four times its proper dimensions, a tail as stiff as a poker—with every separate hair standing stiffly erect on it—really, it was more a chimney-sweep's swab than a poker—with the added bizarre touch of a neck-ruff or frill of outjutting metal scallops.

Once, twice, thrice she soared aloft, and the motion of her winnowing pads surrounded her as with a foggy dark blur. Then a primeval impulse, operating even in that preliminary frenzy, bade her start backing—bade her to back and to keep on backing until she backed out of that horrid helmet, which enveloped her, throat-deep. If the testimony of subsequent eyewitnesses might be accepted, no cat born of cats ever backed more

swiftly or covered a greater territory in the same relative space of time than this cat did. On the spot, they awarded her the world's backing up championship.

First of all, she backed up violently and swiftly until her hind-quarters bumped the kitchen steps; thereupon she followed a procedure which, with impromptu variations to suit altered conditions, she followed thereafter. Twisting sidewise as she towered in the air, she slapped with bared talons at the unseen obstacle which had checked her, then sheared off and resumed the retreat, now rising on her rear legs and sparring out with her front paws, now down again on all fours, but always with that grossly fattened tail pointing the line of travel like a bowsprit set on the wrong end of a rudderless craft driven sharply astern.

The comparisons may be confused, but then so was this cat. Drifting rapidly, she skirted the foundation wall of the kitchen; still going aft, she jibbed through the side yard, past the house; thence slanted and tacked at acute angles across the front yard until she caromed against a baseboard of the front fence. She jumped high, whirled in mid-flight, struck out violently, clutched the plank, held fast, mounted a panel by feel, and from its summit threw a magnificent retroflexed somersault into space. She alighted in Locust Street, with all the wide world behind her, sight unseen, for her to back through.

The day, as may have been stated, was warm, unseasonably so, considering that September was

well advanced—so warm, in fact, that summer garb and summer habits held their prolonged and continued sway. At this hour the populace at large dozed in the fag end of the customary siesta. Some folks were coming forth into the glare open—a few whose business brought them—but the town wasn't what you would call fully wide-awake yet. It was not of record that any responsible person beheld the Custer family's vizored lady cat as she progressed—if progressed is the right word—for a distance of upwards of a block and a half. Only, nobody at that time and at that town knew them as blocks; they were *squares*, always. And, for that matter, still are.

We may safely figure that our cat's recession only began to attract attention and comment when she reached and had entered Pettus' lamp store at the intersection of Locust Street and Washington Street, an outpost of the main business district. In the interim we may figure her as going with high velocity along, by alternating spells a living projectile, a blind ungovernable pouncing force, a paroxysm, a seeming violation of all natural and physical laws and, even so, absolutely unobserved. So, then, by leaps and bounds, fleetly yet erratically moving, she brings herself and us to Pettus' corner.

The proprietor, Mr. O. D. D. Pettus, better known as Mr. Odd Pettus, was alone when the interruption came. That is to say, he practically was alone, although we must take into account old Major Lycurgus Connors, snoring peacefully in a chair tilted back against one of the lintels of the

open side door where the shade fell against the wall, with his whiskers sprayed out upon his venerable chest and his crutches bestowed across his lap. Mr. Pettus, having concluded his own after-dinner nap, was opening a crate of goods behind a cross-partition at the rear of the establishment.

The Major took his title from a more or less vague claim to service in an earlier war than the one of '61-'65. He left it to be inferred that it was the Mexican War. At any rate, the Major bore himself with decidedly the military air, and frequently stated that he would have accepted a commission in the Confederacy also, except that about the time this later war broke out something came up.

His use of crutches was due to a persistent and rather mystifying affliction. More than a year before, Mr. Julius Hagadorn, real estate and insurance in all its branches, having set out to enroll members for a new fraternal lodge, with sick benefits, death benefits and a special clause known as the "accident and weekly indemnity providing regular payments during periods of total or partial incapacity clause," had solicited Major Connors, regarding him, by reason of his sedentary habits, as a preferred risk, if ever there had been one. The veteran listened to argument and signed up and, producing capital from some unknown source, paid the initiation fee and first year's dues in advance.

By a curious coincidence, in the very next week following, and while he was, as he said, engaged in splitting kindling wood, he struck himself on his



right ankle with the butt of a heavy ax. It was a surprise for many when they learned that Major Connors ever stooped to splitting kindling wood so long as his unmarried daughter, with whom he resided, kept her health and strength; however that was aside from the question.

Superficially, the wound in due time healed but the victim remained disabled. Let the examining physician for the society think what he pleased—it was his, the Major's, own leg, wasn't it? Well, then, wasn't he the best judge of what kind of a fix it was in? Personally he was of the opinion that the original injury had caused some of the more important leaders to draw. He could touch the foot to the earth, tenderly, but, without artificial props, couldn't walk a step on it. So he went thereafter on crutches and regularly drew down his twelve dollars and a half a week and, as between him and Mr. Hagadorn, relations had become permanently strained.

Only a little while before, the latter, returning to his office upstairs over Roundtree's drug store after a refreshing forty winks at home, had, with a hostile eye, observed the ancient propped alongside Pettus' door diagonally across the way, there enjoying the unruffled rest of one who is in receipt of a steady and a guaranteed income, and pausing before he mounted the steps, had said to himself:

"Look at him, will you? Just look a' yonder at him, I ask you. Well, I bet I catch him off his guard yet, see if I don't—the dad-burned old fraud?"

The first suspicion Mr. Pettus had that anything out of the ordinary impended came, as he himself stated later, when he heard—but let us give his own stirring description in his own graphic words:

“All of a sudden there was a kind of a scrambling, scrabbling sound out front, like as if something alive was spinning around out there, and then a showcase breaking and things beginning to smash off the shelves. Only, these sounds didn't seem to be coming separately—not in succession, I mean. It was more like as if they all happened, as you might say, right together, or anyways so close together that you couldn't scarcely pick out one from the other.

“So, naturally, with that I came running out from behind to see what was the matter, and I never had such a jolt in my life. Something or other—it was moving so fast I couldn't make out then what it was, but it was about two feet long, more or less, and it was covered all over with stiff black hair and it was screeching and spitting all the time in a curious kind of a choked-up way, and it had about ten or twelve legs, seemed like, or maybe more, and there was a funny looking kind of a fancy tinware coupling capped on to one end or the other of it, but which end I couldn't tell, not at first, but I did in a minute—well, anyhow, this here crazy whatyoumaycallum was going like a streak of greased lightning along that further shelf yonder, stripping it bare as it went and knocking brand new coal-oil lamps every which-a-way.

“Don't ask me where it came from, or what it

was aiming to do, if anything, by cutting up all those didoes, or whatever possessed it to pick out that shelf to swarm up on, or even how it got up there in the first place, because I can't tell you any one of those things. But I can tell you how it got down, because I saw that part myself. When it got through cleaning off that shelf its entire length—with me standing there, as you might say, just so absolutely dumbfounded I couldn't make a move—why, about that time it butted into a cross-brace, and with that it seemed to sort of hunch up and right quick stretch out again, same as a chunk of rubber, and next minute it'd fell out and landed on top of that other showcase and cracked it across the top, too, and then dove off of there and lit on the floor and capered round a little bit more in a kind of a general direction, as you might say.

“Then it seemed to get organized and skedaddled out of the side door, tail first, like a crawfish—only no crawfish ever traveled as fast as this varmint did—and was gone like a flash; and me left here with my mouth hanging wide open, and up to my knee joints, pretty near it, in ruin and destruction. The whole thing happened so quick that if it hadn't 'a' been for this here mess of busted lamps and smashed lamp chimneys all over the floor and the holes in both them showcases and all, I could almost 'a' sworn it was a dream, I could so. . . . And, oh yes, then, the next thing, old Connors was letting out the blamedest squall ever you heard in your born life. It seems he hadn't waked up till then—just snoozed along right through all that

excitement and racket. How he did it, though, beats me!"

He didn't. As a matter of truth, the cripple already was rousing, even before the assailant backed under his chair and rose between his knees. His sound somnambulence slowly capitulated to the crashing tumult behind him. Fretfully he raised a drowsy eyelid, then stretched it and its mate in a demoniac glare. It was not well that any aged man rudely should be summoned from the depths of peaceful sleep to be attacked, on no provocation, by such an incredible apparition. The Major was well acquainted with cats, and naturally he knew tin cans, but this thing that was part of it can and the rest of it cat—this masquerading monstrosity which came hurtling up under his whiskers and affixed itself to his shirt front and set sharp claws in him—this was too much. With a shriek of horror and the words, "Great Gawd Ermighty, let loose o' me!" he plucked the clinging hybrid from his bosom and cast it afar and, with one splendid spring, reached the edge of the sidewalk.

Mr. Hagadorn, himself profoundly startled, hurried to his front window at exactly the peak moment for beholding Major Connors when that gentleman, having run a few paces briskly, recovered himself and dashed back and with a right goodly swing of a good right leg aimed a kick at the recoiling enemy as swiftly it retrograded past the flank of the Pettus building and was gone. Up to the hour of his demise, which occurred some years later, the old warrior nourished for all cats a deep



WITH A SHRIEK OF HORROR THE MAJOR  
PLUCKED THE CLINGING HYBRID FROM HIS  
BOSOM.





hatred which dated from one memorable September day. People knew it must date from this day because this also was the day when his disability payments ceased. With gladness in his heart, Mr. Hagadorn attended to the latter detail.

From this point, namely, Pettus' store, the masked Custer cat was seen no more until she reappeared over on Oak Street on the other side of the square, which was where the meeting with Mrs. Slop Johnson occurred. Before this, though, she must have traversed a stretch of fully three hundred feet. There was a theory, set up afterwards, that she backed the entire length of Farrell Brothers' livery stable and, emerging by its rear exit, crossed an intervening vacant lot alongside the Cumberland Presbyterian parsonage and either penetrated or scaled a billboard standing at the pavement line of the thoroughfare; but since this lacked confirmation from any reliable source, it remained a theory, although a plausible one. The provable fact was that, not giving notice, she launched herself, with apparent felonious intent, straight at Mrs. Slop Johnson's head just as that elderly lady issued from the parsonage gate carrying a heavy and dripping wooden bucket in either hand.

A word explanatory here is needed as to the personality of Mrs. Slop Johnson and her calling. Her first name, which she herself did not use but nearly everybody else did, was derived from the trade she followed. In the final quarter of the century last past she constituted the nearest approach

to a dependable sanitary department that this town knew. Her mission in life was raising hogs. To provide them with sustenance she toured the community, acquiring the table leavings which grateful housekeepers had saved up for her, and bore them away to her populous sties in the hollow below the old Government Barracks. All things that were to pigs edible she collected. Single-handed, she diligently pursued this life work of hers. Mrs. Slop Johnson was by way of being a social recluse, anyhow. We need not dwell on that point; it is obvious.

The day's doings were well along; the regular clientele had been visited at their homes. A battery of eight barrels, mounted and wedged in a double row upon the bed of her rickety wagon, were filled almost but not quite to the overflowing measure. These were tight barrels but they lacked heads or covers to them. She would add the offerings from the parsonage kitchen and then, well content and with a brimming load, would drive her team homeward. This was her intention until something interposed.

Once already, some hours earlier, Mrs. Johnson had encountered a certain salmon can. Any impression it then made upon her mind had been but a passing one. She was not prepared to encounter it again, and still less prepared to find it traveling now in the company of a strange four-legged furry black creature, as a crown for the rearward-turned prow of that creature. Least of all was she prepared to dodge it as, legged, bodied, tailed and en-

dowed with vigorous life, it sped toward her, seeming to catapult right off or right through the ragged face of the hoardings which fronted the vacant lot next door to where the Cumberland Presbyterian pastor lived. She dodged, though. One instant she was looking idly up from below at a faded poster of the John Robinson circus; the next she was dodging.

On past her, beyond the gutter, two stout mules stood with sprung front knees and heads down and hides flinching against the pestersome flies. It was the near mule that chiefly suffered by reason of the ensuing complication. Put yourself in that mule's place and then ask yourself whether you are one to judge him harshly. Suppose you were a mule, a mule feeling in tune with a placid and harmonious world and drowsy besides, and all of a sudden, with no warning whatsoever, a whirling, boxing, daunting, strange dark animal with a bright circlet freakishly enclosing its head, and accompanied by a sharp metallic clattering, descended out of nowhere between your hind legs and instantly climbed up one of those legs, sinking sharp claws into you and uttering fierce stifled outcries as it climbed. What would you do? Yes? Well, that is precisely what this other mule did. And, perhaps through sympathy, his team brother went along with him.

First, though, the bedeviled near mule, being a true mule, must kick up behind with all his might and main; and the foe which has so affrighted him and now so painfully plagues him goes floating

swiftly away on an involuntary air journey of approximately forty feet. It strikes on the hard roadway, tinned end first, and under such impact the battered can splits open along a side seam and its recent captive, once more freed and unhooded, and, despite all that she had gone through and up against, not physically disabled—as the reader will be glad to learn—but, of course, nervously much shaken, darts into a handy weed patch and vanishes out of our view and this chapter.

## *Chapter III*

### ONE OF THOSE DULL AFTERNOONS

**F**IRE CHIEF JAMES COLLISTER—"Big Jimmy"—was sitting in front of Number 1 Engine House, playing seven-up at ten cents a side with some reckless somebody who should have known better than to play seven-up against him unless for the fun of being beaten, when out of the south he heard the runaways coming.

The Chief was a man of brawn and of versatile parts, as well. Not only did he head the paid department and play the best game of seven-up in the municipality, but he had other specialties, such, for instance, as checkers and judging live stock on the roof and trimming the ears and tails of terriers and diagnosing the ailments of horses. But stopping runaways was his favorite side-line.

He sprang up, kicking over his chair, and ran out into the street and set himself just beyond the curbing. Oak Street no longer was slumberous. Roused by the clatter of pelting hoofs and whirling wheels, residents hastened to their front doors to watch, through the choking dust a frantic team of mules lunge by, with a laden wagon careening at their heels. Far on behind and losing ground at

every step, followed Mrs. Slop Johnson, at the top of her voice mechanically uttering futile "Whoas!" with none to heed her.

Big Jimmy's trained eye appraised at a distance what others were seeing at closer range. This was no single runaway; this was a double runaway. To him, then, so much the greater credit for stopping it.

He poised in a practiced crouch. He made an admirable picture of readiness and resolution, with his official blue flannel shirt opened down as far as its third button to show his hairy chest, his elbows out, his competent hands spread for the clutch at throat-latch or bridle bit, his sinewy legs tensed to start their forward leap at exactly the properly spaced moment.

The runaways came tearing on, holding to a straight, unswerving course. They were almost upon him—they were upon him—and now he leaped. But even as his toes bent to leave the earth, Chief Collister's good angel looked his way. In that infinitesimal nick of time he recognized the foreparts of those onrushing shapes, realized what it was he was about to stop, discerned correctly the nature of that which churned and spouted and sprayed from all those open barrels. He leaped—with a reverse action, rearward, so that he was not completely deluged but only splattered upon, here and there. But he put his shoulders right through the show-window of Mrs. M. Olin's millinery shop adjoining Headquarters, where a special display



for the approaching fall opening had just been completed.

At the risk of anticipating a climax it nevertheless is incumbent upon us to break the sequence of progressive developments and to precede the runaway to the setting of its final and culminating scene. Let us hurry on ahead, then, down to the river front.

On a hot day, and already we know this was a very hot day, the coolest place in town and the most favored was the narrow opening to the right of the office entrance, in the west elevation of the new ice factory—new then, but decayed and crumbling now—which opening led back along a short passage to a wider, windowless ground-floor chamber beneath the freezing vats. This inner place was in the shape of a square bottle; its one outer vent was as the neck of a bottle is; and through it, along a steep chute, the big crystalline blocks slid down to where, just outside, the company's ice wagons and the drays of private consumers backed up against a low platform to take on cargoes. From the interior of the congealing plant gusts of chilled air blew down to create a refreshing and unfailing draftiness.

Right here, within the bottle mouth, sat a half-dozen of the elder statesmen, prominent men, leaders of affairs—such men as General Peter J. Litchen and Judge Boone Crawford and the Reverend Mr. Crumbaugh. They had been discussing the Money Devils of Wall Street and the Tariff

and the lesser evils of Republican misrule. They now were discussing the mistakes of Braxton Bragg. Presently they would cut a watermelon.

General Litchen, late of Forrest's staff, was speaking. A great clamor, drawing nearer, caused him to break off and peer out of his retreat. Around the corner of Jefferson Street and into Front Street whirled a runaway team. The runaways—a pair of big sorrel mules—were drawing a spring wagon; they headed straight in the direction of the delivery exit. In alarm, the general and his confreres shrank well back within the shelter of their refuge, awaiting the crash against the wall of the building.

No crash came but something else came. For, just when a collision seemed inevitable, the galloping animals shied off toward the middle of the road. A front wheel caught on an outer corner of the platform. The wagon bed heaved, buckled, turned completely over, and with a mighty *plop* of liquid matters and a mushy dull thud of more solid parts and a splintering of soaked oaken staves, it deposited its contents, barrels and all, precisely under and across the low-arched opening. No civil engineer—presuming that any civil engineer would deal with such materials—could have blockaded that exit more perfectly. The elder statesmen were sealed in; you couldn't even see them over the intervening barrier.

This done, the mules mutually agreed to call it a day. Losing spirit, they dragged the capsized

wreck of their wagon a few rods farther and slowed down to a trot; presently they halted and were cropping herbage at the top of the city wharf. Few observed them, though. Popular notice was concentrated upon the elder statesmen, or rather, upon the spot where they last had been seen. They remained invisible but their voices were heard, speaking in tones and with words which gave added zest to the public interest—especially General Litchen's words. He seemed to forget that a minister of the Gospel was present.

Still, his patience, and that of his companions, did undergo sore strain; they had to wait so long for deliverance from captivity. It was hard to find volunteers—even paid volunteers—for the task of digging them out. It must have been cold in there where they were corked up, and the air close, too; one gathered as much by what, from time to time, the prisoners were saying. Many heard what was said. Long before the rescue had been accomplished there was quite a large audience. Citizens came from over the lower business district and stood about and harkened, all wearing on their faces the pleased look which a street crowd anywhere always does wear when somebody else is in trouble or embarrassment.

It must be nearly three o'clock. How time dragged along! John C. Calhoun Custer Junior arose laggingly from his place hard by the new acting bar. He yawned and went and leaned with

## ONE OF THOSE DULL AFTERNOONS

weariness against one of its uprights. An abiding sense of the disenchantment which comes with advancing age was heavy upon him.

"Oh, shuckin's," he said once again. "Seems like nothin' ever happens round this daggone town when a feller gits to be goin' on fourteen."

## *Chapter IV*

### IDEAS COME TO MR. FERGUSON

**W**E are told that a cat has nine lives. It was perhaps fitting therefore that a cat which had deported herself as the Custer family's cat had, should be at least a nine days' wonder—in the ratio of a day of wonder for each life. With the passage of the weeks though fresher events and newer sensations made more talk and her remembered exploits made less. Besides, people had their own troubles to worry over. Take Mr. Eli Ferguson.

Where he sat Mr. Ferguson could see numerous examples, all simultaneously provided by the little gods of coincidence, to square with the very point which at this moment he was turning in his mind. The landscape fairly abounded in them. Just over the way, the Rogers' new setter pup dragged its tether back and forth beneath the wire on which the tether was threaded. The restlessness of puppyhood bade the creature to romp and to ramble; the device by which it was controlled held it in definite bounds; yet in its aimless gambolings over the prescribed beat the pup seemed quite content.

Next door, on the Housers' front porch, the youngest Houser baby crawled, a happy occupant, inside the penned enclosure which fenced it off from the dangerous proximity of the unguarded front steps, while down on the earth, the next to the youngest Houser baby tugged against a leathern harness adorned with sleigh-bells on the breast strap and fitted with guiding reins. A half grown colored girl, officiating as nursemaid, held these reins, thus serving the double purpose of keeping the youngster upright on his unsteady pins and of letting him play at being a frolicsome horsie as he staggered to and fro across the grass plot. The infants of the race, the pup that some day would be a dog, already were accepting the restraints which made for a safe and ordered civilization.

Along the street men of Mr. Ferguson's acquaintance stepped briskly to business, obeying the universal laws of duty and responsibility; the bonds which drew them onward might be invisible to the eye, but still were strong as steel. An occasional team passed, the drivers intent on their errands, the attendant teams without rebellion drawing the burdens to which they were snaffled and yoked. All visible living things answered the call of compulsion. Why, then, was his home an exception to the common rule for man and beast and nursing? Why was it that instead of joining that passing pilgrimage of his fellow bread-winners he must, on so fine an October morning, spend valued time to wrestle with this problem which baffled him and upset the domestic economies of the household?



"I declare to goodness gracious I don't know what we are going to do about that boy!" It was Mrs. Ferguson, speaking despairfully and rocking hard in a porch chair just behind him.

"Yes, Grace, you've said that same thing at least a dozen times inside the last half-hour," answered Mr. Ferguson, tossing the comment over his shoulder.

"All right, then, what are *you* going to do about him?" she demanded.

"I don't know," confessed Mr. Ferguson, with hopelessness. "Honestly, I don't know. Whippings don't seem to do any good, nor scoldings either. You've scolded until you were worn out and I've larruped him until I'm ashamed of myself. For a grown man to be forever licking a boy, even if the boy is his own son, always seemed to me a cruel sort of a performance, at best. Some parents may not think so, but I do. And yet, by heavens, before the seat of his pants gets cooled off from the last licking he had, he's looking for another chance. How many times does this make since spring—eight or nine? Or is it ten? There must be a strain of gipsy blood somewhere back in him!"

"Not on my side of the family there isn't—I'll say that much," countered Mrs. Ferguson with spirit, temporarily diverted from the main topic. "Eli Ferguson, if you're trying to intimate, merely because my poor Uncle Henry Templeton had sort of a restless disposition, that——"

"Grace, I'm not trying to intimate anything.

I'm only trying to figure out a way to cure the boy of what ails him. I don't want to be a petty tyrant around my own house; I don't want to make my own son afraid of me. I only want to find out some scheme, short of half killing him, to break up this mania of his. Talking doesn't help—we've found that out; ordinary punishments don't help. This last time has just naturally got to be the last time, that's all—scaring you half to death and keeping me up all night hunting for him when I need my rest if I'm going to be able to earn a living for this family. There must be something we haven't tried—but I don't know what it is!" He groaned, his sleepy eyes mechanically scanning those evidences of a prevalent discipline already cited as outstanding features of the neighborhood picture. For him there almost was mockery in them.

To his inattentive ears came dimly, as from a long distance, the voice of his wife, repeating what already had been gone over more than once at breakfast: "Off he'll start for school, looking as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and the next thing you know his teacher is sending a note home to say he hasn't been there at all and is he sick or something? Goodness knows playing hookey until he gets so many black marks that they've threatened, I don't know how often, to expel him, is bad enough. But goodness knows it's ten times worse when school is let out on account of this epidemic of measles around town, and I'm afraid to let the children off the place for fear of

their catching it, and keeping asafetida bags around their necks and physicing them night and morning and everything; and then, no sooner is my back turned for a minute than he slips off. And doesn't come in for dinner, and doesn't come in for supper, and by bedtime I'm almost distracted, imagining all sorts of things, because he's never been gone a whole night before, and finally at daylight this morning when I'm nearly out of my head from anxiety and you've notified the police, and in my mind I can see them dragging the river, and then where do they find him? Away up yonder seventeen miles away——"

"Seven," said Mr. Ferguson, with a business man's instinct for statistical accuracy.

"Well, seven, then; I'm sure seven is just as bad as seventeen. Away up yonder at Lawton's Bluff sound asleep in that horrible old shanty-boater's bed, running the risk of catching I don't know what."

"But you burned his clothes, didn't you, mommer? And you scrubbed him all over with that funny green soap, didn't you, mommer?" Seven-year-old Alice, the sister of the criminal, spoke up where she was snuggled against her mother's skirts. "You even scrubbed his head, didn't you, mommer, didn't you?"

"Thank goodness he still had on his asafetida bag!" Mrs. Ferguson was continuing the recital as though there had been no interruption. "That's one thing, at least, I have to be grateful for. But

just the mere thought of a child of mine staying all night in that horrible old man's den——”

“Hold on, Grace,” said Mr. Ferguson, “that shanty-boater wasn’t a bad fellow at all. He gave the kid shelter, anyhow.”

“Didn’t I see him with my own eyes when he came back here with you, bringing Ernie?” demanded Mrs. Ferguson. “Wasn’t he smoking the rankest old pipe that ever I smelt in my life? Didn’t his neck and ears look as though they hadn’t been touched with a wash-rag in a month of Sundays? Didn’t he have those awful old whiskers all over his face? Didn’t——”

Suddenly Mr. Ferguson stood up; there was intent in the movement, and his mouth had set in determined lines.

“Grace,” he said, “seems to me I heard you saying only yesterday that you felt as if you’d been neglecting your Aunt Lottie out at Concord. Well, this looks to me like a good day for you to go out to see her. I want you to start right away and take Alice along with you. Alice, child, run around back to the stable and tell Dave to hook up Chinkapin to the surrey.”

“Oh, goodie, goodie!” The daughter wiggled out from under her mother’s elbow. “Mommer, can I drive part of the way? Mommer, can I?”

“Hold on a second, Alice,” said her father. “Tell Dave that as soon as he’s done that I want him to go down to the—to one of the stores to get something for me. Tell him to hurry, now. And stop by the kitchen and tell Diana that you-all won’t be

here for dinner and that supper tonight'll be late. I don't want to see you two coming back until late this evening—not until nearly dark." He was speaking to his wife now. "You can have a nice quiet time out there in the country, Grace, and take a good long nap, too. Go ahead on in the house and get ready to start, please."

Mrs. Ferguson arose, but fluttered in a spell of indecision.

"Goodness knows I've been promising myself for the longest to spend a whole day with Auntie," she said, "but—but, Eli, what are you going to do about Ernie? You're not fixing to stay here all day with him, are you?"

"Me? I should say not! I've got my work to do; there's probably somebody waiting downtown right this minute to see me about the campaign rally tomorrow night. You needn't worry about Ernie, though—I'll guarantee you that for once, anyhow, he won't go straying off the place.

"Ye-es, but you can't leave him locked up alone all day upstairs? It isn't—well, humane. And besides, suppose the house should catch on fire and burn down or something else dreadful like that!"

"I'm not going to leave him all day in that room, either. I've got a little plan I'm going to try on that young gentleman."

"But, dear, I'm so afraid you'll do something drastic. Ernie isn't a bad boy at all, except in just this one respect. Maybe if I went up and talked with him—maybe if you talked with him again, maybe——"

"Grace, will you please quit making useless suggestions and do what I've asked you to do—and do it right off? I don't want you round here wasting sympathy on that boy and getting yourself all worked up to boot. This looks like a man's job to me and I'm going to put it through without interference from anybody."

"But what are you going to do to him? Surely, Eli, I'm entitled to know that much?"

"Sorry; I don't agree with you. I'll tell you this much, though, if it's going to be any comfort to you—I'm through with licking him. I'm not going to lay my hand on him—to hurt him. What I'll do will be strictly for his own good; you appreciate that, don't you?"

"Ye-es, but——"

"Now just run along like a sane creature and be ready to put out for Concord as soon as the rig comes around front here."

They hadn't been married nearly fifteen years for nothing; this lady knew her husband, mood and tense. She went, consumed, though, with feminine curiosity and quick with a maternal and therefore an utterly unreasoning pity for her offending first-born, which also was very feminine.

To Master Ernest Ferguson, victim of the wanderlust, and at this moment an uneasy prisoner, certain noises presently filtered in through the windows of the top-floor bedroom which was the place of his confinement. He heard wheels turning on the graveled driveway at the other side of the house; this would mean somebody was going



somewhere in the family pleasure vehicle. A little later there arose at the rear the distant sound of a metallic pounding. That, undoubtedly, would be his father tinkering on something in his private workshop at the far end of the kitchen wing. His father was deft with his hands and loved to mend old things and to make new ones. He had a forge out there and a lathe and all manner of fascinating tools which no one else, on the pain of death, might meddle with. But why was his father hammering away at home on a week-day when, by rights, he should have been at his office hours before?

Time, you see, was dragging for the incarcerated one. Time must drag when one is in the solitary cell awaiting the infliction of the penalty for one's transgressions. Understand, though, that this particular inmate was not deeply remorseful for what he had done. He was apprehensively speculating as to the nature of the impending punitive measures. One circumstanced as he was, and one, moreover, who is clad in but a single garment and that garment a nightrobe of a thinnish material, has cause to dread the very possible worst.

He perched on a chair, nursing a bare knee between his interlaced fingers. The clinking sound seemed to have transferred itself to some more remote spot beyond the farther wall of his prison house; very thinly indeed, he could hear it. But for it he had lost what passing interest he might originally have had; darkling thoughts concerned him. It must be long past dinner-time now. It

must be getting along toward night. Was slow starvation to be his doom? As a matter of fact the hour was eleven-forty a. m.

The bolt on the outer side of the door was drawn with a snick. With a nervous start the captive got on his feet, his naked toes wriggling. His father stood in the door opening. He entered and on the rumbled bed deposited a bundle.

"Here's your other suit," he said, "and a clean waist and underwear, and your shoes and stockings—put them on." He waited in a portentous silence until the culprit was clothed. "Here's your cap, too," he said then, and produced it from his pocket. "Now then, young man, you come along with me. We aren't going very far—only as far as the front yard. But first we'll stop downstairs while Diana gives you something to eat; it's almost dinner-time anyhow. I told her to fix up an early snack for you. I'll get a bite downtown somewhere."

The front yard? That prospect seemed not at all foreboding. It was his father's way of saying it—so grimly and with a studied emphasis on the words—which gave the delinquent little fluttering sensations down inside of him. And there was the unusual emptiness of the house when they had descended. And then, to top all, there was this unaccountable derangement of the regular routine: the noonday meal was the principal meal of the day in this home, as in all properly organized homes of this town.

Meekly enough, and saying not a word, he went

along, though. Where dishes were spread on a corner of the dining-room table he gulped at the cold food, his father waiting, meanwhile, in an ominous silence; then followed his father on out into the balmy sunshine, where maples blazed red and hickories were gilded yellow and the painted leaves came floating down through a golden haze. But the boy, blinking in the clear light, had no eye for Indian Summer's flaunting regalia. Still meek, still mute, but with a horrid, numbed, sunken feeling at the pit of his stomach, as a sudden realization came touching on the nature of the unutterable thing which was to be visited upon him, he yielded to the inevitable, obeying commands to halt on a certain spot and to stand still.

His jailer, who had knelt on the grass, stood up and brushed his knees, then fell back a pace or two, at the same time slipping into a trousers pocket a key which had just served a fell and dreadful purpose.

"Now then," he said, "I reckon it would take a blacksmith to get you out of that."

This relentless parent spoke truly. For his offspring's left leg at its slimmest diameter was now encircled by a shining band or cuff, fashioned of new strap iron, an inch or so in width; it was light but strong; it fitted snugly but not tightly over the lower shank; it was so neatly made that, worn for pleasure, it might actually have been called ornamental. On its inner side it was made fast, through slot and hasp, with a small stout padlock which dangled against the wearer's ankle-joint like

a sort of penitential decoration, and from a clevis riveted to its outer curve there led a bright strong chain ten feet long, which at the opposite end was ringed about a three-ply length of telegraph wires. These wires, tightly twisted together to form a tripled strand, stretched tautly at a height of perhaps seven feet above the earth from a shackle-bolt screwed into a corner post of the house slantwise across the yard to a slenderish maple tree some twenty yards away, near the front fence, being here wound about the tree bole at the level of a lower bough and made secure with many twistings and with staples driven deep into the living wood. When Mr. Ferguson worked in metals his thoroughness was professional; in this undertaking he had, for reasons, taken pains to be especially thorough.

"Yes, my son," he said, contemplating his handiwork with an ironic satisfaction, "here you are and here you'll stay, I'll bet something on that. You can have the benefit of breathing a lot of this nice fresh air and get plenty of healthful exercise, too; there's nothing to heed you if you want to promenade along under this wire. And when you get tired, why, you can sit down on the ground and rest yourself. But, as you will observe, there's no place for you to hide. That's the main thing—you can't possibly get out of sight. Everybody who goes along the street is bound to see you and everybody will stop and look at the boy who's held on a leash like Mr. Rogers' puppy across the street yonder. You can even play if you want to. But

I figure you'll do your playing alone. I figure there's not another boy in this whole town who'd be caught playing with a boy who has to be chained up to keep him from running away. . . . Well, I guess you're already wondering, aren't you, how long you're going to be kept out here this way?"

With his chin on his chest the forlorn captive nodded.

"Until you learn not to run away any more—that's how long. You're to be left here just as you are now until I get home tonight. I'll take you in then, but tomorrow morning, bright and early, out you come again; and right here you stay, every day and all day from now on, until you're cured of what ails you. Sounds like a hard remedy, eh, son? Well, maybe so, but it's a hard disease you're suffering from. Good-bye."

He turned and went away. Involuntarily his victim tried to follow him. There was a slithering sound as the ring ran along the trolley overhead, a sprightly jingling and clinking of iron links, and then a jerk as the prisoner was brought up short, with his gyved ankle drawn into the air and held suspended. Mr. Ferguson heard it all, but Mr. Ferguson did not glance back; he was no stern Roman, but merely a harassed and desperate business man. He was afraid that one more look at that stunned, woebegone face, at that drooped and shrunken figure, might make him relent of his design. So he went thence, and the convict, tugging spasmodically at his leash, was left alone.

No, not entirely alone, either. For, venturing

to lift his shamed head, he was aware that Diana, the black cook, and Dave, her husband and vassal, were peering at him from around a rear corner of the house. Theirs was a thrilled and a morbid stare, with perhaps a gleam of compassion in it, too, but he seemed to read in their eyes only gloating. As swiftly as was possible, considering his handicap, he ran in the diagonal direction for so far as he could go and huddled behind the insufficient shelter of the guardian trunk which marked the more distant terminal of his range; then immediately unhuddled himself and hastened back over the same route he just had traveled. For pedestrians were drawing nigh. Did he tarry alongside the tree or near it, these approaching persons hardly could fail to take note of his fettered state. Better a familiar audience of two than a strange and jeering audience of many.

Burning all over with humiliation and horror, with his mind in a confused flutter, he backed himself to the wall, covering with his slim body as much of the pendent chain as he could cover, and there, for a space, he stayed, all the while gazing at a point straight ahead of him, with the assumed air of being very deeply concerned over some absorbing inner topic. So the first of the passers-by, such of them as chanced to glance his way, saw only a small boy plastered flat against the side of a house, his legs buried halfway to the knees in a border of low shrubbery and his head tucked down, seemingly immersed in philosophical speculation. If any among them wondered at



the marvel of a small boy remaining stationary and quiet for minutes on end, still none was moved to investigate a thing so unusual as almost to be unprecedented. They went on about their several affairs and he was advised of their departure by the diminishing thud of footsteps on the wooden sidewalk beyond. Shortly thereafter the servants likewise withdrew themselves; he breathed a trifle easier.

But presently, on the heels of these others, arrived one whose chief pleasure in life was to inquire into things. Effects he created, results he obtained, but at his age one's mission was to seek out prime causes. He hurried along, rejoicing in the present freedom of a second vacation when ordinarily school would have claimed his reluctant attendance, and thankful for measles abroad in the community so long as they spared him. From the opposite side of the street this eager person spied a supposedly friendly form and checked his gait.

"Eyho!" he called.

There was no response. The figure fitted so flatly to the brick background maintained its curious pose of utter aloofness.

"Eyho-o-o, Bubber Ferguson!" Master Erwin tried it again in a shriller key.

Still the other seemed not to heed his hail. This was most puzzling; this did call for investigation. The Erwin boy crossed the street and, inserting his toes between two pickets of the Ferguson fence, lifted his face above the palings.

"Say, Bubber, whut's the matter? Cantcher hear me? Come on round to Juney Custer's. Everybody else in the gang's goin' be there soon as they kin git back from dinner. We got a whole big pile of leaves raked up—gee, a pile higher'n you are! Goin' have a bonfire and ever'-thing. And after that we're goin' to rake up a heap bigger pile; but we're goin' to save that one up fur the p'litical celebration tomorrow night. Come on!"

Without shifting his pose his friend made answer—an ungracious answer and delivered in a strangely choked and blurry tone:

"Naw, go on away! Cantcher see I'm busy? Go on away, I tell you."

"Whut you busy at? I don't see you doin' nothin'—only just standin' still there like an old dummy or somethin'!"

"I'm busy thinkin'—that's whut."

This mystery did indeed cry out for closer scrutiny. The Erwin boy set himself to scaling the fence. Halfway over, with his fore part on the inside and his legs on the outer, and pointed up-rights pressing into his stomach, he poised at a perilous slant.

"You stay out of my yard, Earwigs Erwin! I guess this is my own yard, ain't it? I guess you ain't got no right comin' in it without I say so you kin!"

The tone of command was downright bitter; you might even call it hostile. Yet on the occasion of their last meeting they had parted in a spirit of perfect amity. More puzzled than ever, the Erwin

boy stared, continuing to balance himself precariously. For the moment, he found no language in which to clothe his bewilderment. He took it out in staring.

Here the resident made a serious tactical error. As though to enforce his order with violence, he took a forward step, threateningly. For one fleeting instant his left leg—and that which dangled and jangled from it—plainly became visible. Quickly he drew it back and replanted it in the shielding herbage.

But Master Erwin had seen. He had seen that which widened his eyes to their greatest possible diameters. “Gee!” said the Erwin boy. He said it under his breath, almost reverently, as one might who spoke in church or at a funeral. “Gee!” he said again, still in that hushed, dazed way, while he wriggled down off the palings; and then, expanding his emotions to the tremendous shock of the disclosure, “Gee whil-i-kins!” he whispered to himself as he departed out of that vicinity on a hard run. His features were set in a fixed mold. A psychologist would have said here was a boy who just had beheld a spectacle so utterly unbelievable that speedily he must find others to help him believe it—or burst.

## Chapter V

### THE PRISONER OF CHILL ON

IT was not to be expected that the Erwin boy would fail to return; the Ferguson boy knew better than to hope for that. Nor did the condemned one have long to wait. Within the span of five short minutes the discoverer reappeared. He came, briskly but quietly, and with him, almost stealthily, came half a dozen more. On the sidewalk they halted, studying the Ferguson house closely for signs of adult tenancy. Observing none, they moved forward again in a compact body. Ordinarily they would have climbed the fence. In those days boys by preference climbed fences, even though gaps or gates might be handily adjacent; perhaps they still do. But now, marked all by a strange sobriety, they unlatched the gate and entered. Still maintaining that fine decorum they skirted the lawn at the southern side of the house and stopped twenty feet from the corner of it. From under his eyebrows the captive saw them. He was cognizant that they must possess his terrible secret. But he would stave off the actual disclosure for so long as he could. He strove to make his glance of recognition perfunctory, aloof, preoccupied.

He spoke no word; neither did any of them speak. A pause and a hush followed. Had he been paying some uncomplicated and familiar form of penance they would have had no mercy on him. They would have added their gibes to his sufferings. The person who first referred to tigers as a synonym for cruelty did not know boys in their early teens. Undoubtedly these boys would have danced about the one undergoing punishment, would have thought up stinging taunts; probably they would have sung in chorus a certain derisive refrain which, by an adaptive pronunciation of the flexible key word, could be made to fit any identity; a song which in this instance would have run something like this:

Ole Bubber Ferguson  
Rix, Sticks, Sturveson,  
High Ball, Low Ball  
Ole Bubber Ferguson!

Or possibly, did he weep, the tag line would have been:

Cry-baby Ferguson!

By virtue of countless reiterations this elastic refrain before now had availed to push a victim to wildness. But now no one among the newcomers was moved to chant it. They seemed awed. They pressed together, eying the prisoner almost fearsomely. It was as though he had become a creature marked and set apart from his kind. As a matter of fact, each one of them was face to face with a new experience; mentally, each was

shivering as he put himself in the Ferguson boy's place.

As for the latter, he interpreted rightly the cause of this seeming consideration for his plight. Their forbearance, their very silence, somehow added to his weight of misery. His mask of indifference was all at once dissolved. He allowed himself to be aware of their presence.

"Git out of this yard!" he shouted at them, taking care, even so, to hold his body rigid. "You-all git right out of here, like I'm tellin' you to!"

As though they had not heard him, their formation shifted from a clump to a skirmish line. They spread out and stepped gently, as slowly they came nearer, maneuvering so as to bring his left leg better within the line of vision. It was plain that they morbidly craved to look upon what still was concealed from their view by the low line of herbage growing against the foundation of the house.

"I ain't goin' tell you again!" cried out the beleaguered and desperate Bubber. "If you don't go like whut I say, somebody's goin' to git hurt. I'll—I'll throw somethin' at you!"

It was a vain threat, as he himself knew, and to it only one of the advancing squad gave heed. This boy, a small round quiet boy who wore glasses, was an outlander; temperamentally, he did not match the present company. He was a minister's son, but in him was living refutation of the ancient claim that the worst boy in any town is a minister's son. For this boy was almost incredibly good; he



completely and constantly was guided by a conscience which appeared never to sleep. Perhaps it was an inheritance. Already, within less than a year after accepting a local call, his father had become communally distinguished as a moral force, sniffing out evil where many had previously suspected no evil to be, and dragging it forth and exposing it in the pillory of public scorn. No concern appeared to be too small to escape his reforming care.

And this son of his was above all a biddable son. Perhaps it was because of this innate docility in his nature that slightly he shrank off at the second inhospitable warning of the Ferguson boy, then hovered hesitatingly, as though pulled by opposing desires. But the remaining members of the party continued their flank movement over the grass plot.

Now then, from rage and humiliation the captive turned berserk. Forgetting all else, he charged at them. Before his onslaught they fell back slightly; he lunged out sidewise at the nearermost figure, and the wire tinged and sang, and he was jerked forward and struck on his stomach with the fettered foot held tautly up behind him and the free one drumming the earth impotently.

The lingering son of the clergyman had seen enough. Immediately and in the direction of his own home he swiftly departed, and on his young face was the look of one who bears news of importance to quarters of authority. The rest took no note of his going.

They sat down in the grass, making a sort of

rough circle, open through the middle, and the center of the circle was the Ferguson boy, sobbing loudly and flapping like a hooked fish and contending with his bonds. Well beyond reach of his hands, which now clutched at them and now clenched into fists to beat on the unresisting air, they were squatted like so many Indians in council about the torture stake. The proverbial stoicism of the red race seemed also to be theirs—a borrowed mood, but, for an occasion so extraordinary, a befitting one, it seemed. There was something forced and unnatural about their speech, too; herein they rather suggested specialists at a clinic or investigators dealing impersonally with a rare specimen. For when finally they did speak, it was in guarded undertones and, altogether ignoring Bubber Ferguson's imminent presence and his passionate denunciations of them, they referred to him in the third person precisely as though he had not been there at all.

"First time I ever saw anything like that was when old Mister Kincheloe caught a fox out in the woods and uster keep it in his horse lot," said one.

"I remember," mused a second; "that there old fox wore a groove right down in the ground runnin' back and forth. And then, pretty soon after that, people got to doin' it to dogs."

"That must a' been where this family got the notion of doin' it," commented a third, softly; "frum a dog or somethin'."

"Only here just the other day my father was readin' a piece out loud out of a book about a

feller away off somewheres that was kept like—like that.” It was Custer Junior, who interjected this commentary, and he made his meaning clearer with a restrained gesture of one arm. “No, ’twasn’t exactly like that, neither. Because this here other feller was away down deep in a cold wet old cellar, and he had one of those things”—again he motioned discreetly—“round each one of his legs, and the chain was bolted onto a kind of a stone post. There was a picture of him in the book. And he stayed down there for years and years—him and some of his folks, too. They called him—let’s see now”—he knit his brows in concentration—“oh, yes; I remember now—they called him ‘The Prisoner of Chill On.’ And after a while——”

“Hey there, you young-uns!”

The couchant group turned their heads to see who had interrupted their conference. An elderly man with longish red whiskers was glowering at them above the fence line.

“Whut d’ye mean, you young scoundrels, by keepin’ that there middle chap hitched up that-a-way?” he demanded. “Don’t you know any better than to torment him that-a-way? Don’t you see, from how he’s carryin’ on, that he don’t like to be done that-a-way?”

“We didn’t do it to him,” stated the boy who previously was introduced as Earwigs Erwin.

“Well, who did do it, then, if you didn’t?”

“His folks—that’s who.” It was a boy named Eddie Hewlett who supplied this information.

“His father, it must ’a’ been,” added the Custer

boy. By instinct, as it were, he sensed that this corrective measure surely had sprung from a parental source.

"Fur runnin' away, prob'ly," volunteered Master Erwin again. "He runs away a lot."

"Well, well, well," stated the older spectator. "So that's the way it is, is it? Well, if that don't beat all!" He brought forth spectacles and fitted them to his nose and, no longer moved by apparent pity for the wriggling figure face downward in the grass, he stared long and earnestly.

"Stand up there, buddy," he commanded at length, "or else stay still—I want to see just how you're hooked onto this here wire contraption."

There was no use to struggle further. The cup of the captive's ignominy could hold no more. He stood up sullenly, his face averted. He even lifted the ringed ankle, on the whiskered man's request.

"Well, well, well," said that person after another spell of intent gazing. "In all my born days I can't say as I ever seen the beat." He felt in his waistcoat pocket and flipped with his right hand and a small bright flat circular object spun in the air and fell near the ring of hunched shapes. "There," he said, "I guess such a sight is worth that much, anyway."

He continued down the street, looking backward repeatedly as though loath to abandon his study of a sight so rare and interesting.

"Say, fellers, looky here!" Young Custer spoke in a thrilled tone. It was he who had scrambled to his feet and run to retrieve the onlooker's offer-

ing from where it fell among the grass stems. "He's went and gave us a whole ten-cent piece just fur lettin' him look at—*him!*"

His five associates rose hastily. Temporarily deserting the tethered one they clustered, with excited words, about the Custer boy.

"Gee, a whole ten cents—just fur that!"

"He looked to me like a kind of a stingy man, too. I betcher he wouldn't go throwin' his money round without he thought he was gittin' the worth of it."

"Lemme look at it, Junie. Naw, in my own hand, I mean—you ain't got any right to be holdin' it all the time in your hand. It ain't yours any more'n it's all the rest of us's, I guess."

"Whut'll we buy with it?"

"Whut we better do is, we better give it right back to him."

Four pairs of indignant eyes were instantly aimed at the latest speaker.

"Whut you mean—we better give it back to him?"

"Because my mother she says you musn't never let somebody that you don't know 'em give you money. And ef they do, you musn't take it."

"But we can't give it back to him—he's done gone."

"That's so—he has," agreed the conscientious objector in a relieved tone.

"Anyhow, he give it to us just-so. We didn't none of us ask him fur it, did we? He paid it

his own self fur us lettin' him see *him*, just like Juney said."

"Le's buy rock candy with it—it lasts the longest."

"Naw, le's buy cracknels and animal crackers, mixed."

"Naw, le's——"

"Fellers!" The Custer boy broke in on the disputants. In the discussion he had been taking no part, but had stood by with a considering look on his face. "Say, fellers, lissen—say, if we only had some way to keep *him* hid out of sight I betcher we could make a whole lot more money than this, chargin' people so much a look."

"Gee, Juney; you reckon?"

"Well, that there man that's just went, didn't he pay without our askin' him to? Well, ef he did, wouldn't ever'body else pay, too? Only, we wouldn't tell 'em how much they had to pay. We'd let 'em look first and then they could give us anything they wanted to give us. That-a-way I betcher we'd make more——"

"You ain't a-goin' to do no such of a thing neither, Juney Custer," the unhappy prisoner proclaimed, straining frantically at his bonds. "I guess I got somethin' to say about it, ain't I? I ain't goin' to be showed off like some kind of a wild animal in a cage." He had ceased from weeping, his sulkiness had dropped from him and the inner heat engendered by the prospect of this new and appalling indignity was drying the tears on his cheeks.



"You can't help yourself, kin you? They're goin' to see you anyhow, ain't they? There ain't no place out here fur you to git away frum their seein' you. Purty soon there's goin' to be a big crowd round here—you just see ef there ain't. You can't expect to stay all day chained up in your front yard on one of the most principal streets of this whole town without people stoppin' to look at you. I sh'd say not!"

"Naw, naw, naw!"

"Say, have a little gumption, cantcher?" begged his adviser. "Ain't you goin' to git your share of all the money that's took in? I sh'd think you'd be glad to think people would pay out their good money to look at you instead of hollerin' around this-a-way while I'm tryin' to explain ever'thing to you." The tempter closely studied the face of the tempted; he thought he saw there signs of weakening; he hastened to buttress his argument.

"Why, looky here, Bubber; it'll be just like givin' a show—a real, shore-nuff show. We'll have a tent fur you to stay under—I know where we can git somethin' fur a tent. We kin stretch it right acrost this wire here and fasten it down with stobs each side. And there oughter be a sign up over the tent sayin' on it: 'Wild Boy That His Father Has to Chain Him up to Keep frum Runnin' Away'—somethin' like that. Naw, I tell you! It'll say on it, 'The Prisoner of Chill On,' in big letters. That'll sound more—more myster'ous."

"Naw, I'm tellin' you, naw!"

But the emphasis was gone. Bubber's passionate

negatives were losing their force. With a flirt of his head the strategist called up the reserves. His lieutenants—they magically had become his lieutenants—hedged the Ferguson boy in, reenforcing the chief counselor's pleas for reasonableness with their own pleas. Now then, their leader shot home a crowning inducement:

"You'll git a bigger share than these here other fellers because ef it wasn't fur you we couldn't have a show, because you're the main 'traction. You and me both'll git the two biggest shares." He hastened to explain further, dominantly stilling sounds of rising revolt from the company. "Natchelly I'm entitled to more'n the rest fur thinkin' up the whole thing and knowin' where to git the tent and thinkin' up about havin' a sign and about whut to paint on it, and all. Besides, I got to be the doorkeeper and make speeches tellin' about whut kind of a show we've got. But ever'body will git a plenty out of it, I reckon. And ever'body else'll have plenty to do, too. Earwigs, you and Clabbor Hewlett 'll be the ones that 'll go up and down the street stoppin' people and invitin' 'em to come on and see whut we got on ex'hibition here. And Butch Lacey, you and Freddie McGowan 'll git long sticks and go 'long that front fence yonder and keep other kids frum hangin' round tryin' to see Bubber fur nothin'; and if they don't go way when you tell 'em to, why, you can just take and drive 'em off. And Clabe Lanier here"—he indicated the last remaining member of the troupe—"you'll stand 'longside of me at the door

of the tent and take up the money frum 'em as they come out—that's one of the most important jobs of all. I sh'd say!"

And the Lanier boy, who just now had murmured louder than any at the proposed plan for dividing the cash proceeds, led the shrill chorus of assents which arose. And now, too, the original protestant was surrendering himself to this flood of compelling logic. As presented in so favorable a light, the scheme for capitalizing his misfortune was beginning to offer alluring histrionic possibilities—was beginning to lay hold on him.

"Well," he said, not too willingly, "maybe we might as well try it fur just a little while to see how I like it."

John C. Calhoun Custer Junior, that potential Barnum in short pants, stepped forward and delivered a master stroke. Generously he pressed the first fruits of the young enterprise into the palm of his friend:

"You git this dime to start off with, Bubber," the young diplomat stated grandly. "There ain't any tellin' how much more'll be comin' to you before we git through."

## Chapter VI

### WITH BENEFIT OF CLERGY

**S**TILL, when all was said and done, the role of impresario proved not altogether an easy role. To begin with, there was an organization to be kept under control and in order; that, though, was not the hardest part. The main trouble was with the star. He developed, as stars so often do, that thing called temperament; there were times when he really was quite difficult. This was after his earlier diffidence wore off, when he had ceased to be shamefaced and had become inflamed with arrogance and puffed up with self-content and was shouting orders as though he dealt with some mere underling rather than with a creator sharing equally in the profits, even haughtily bidding the official introducer be silent while he personally directed the attention of patrons to the strength and security of his irons and, with pride and vainglory, elaborated on the series of misdeeds which had brought him to this present enviable place of eminence in the public mind. Older actors than this actor was have a name for this disease. They call it hogging the center of the stage. And our young man had it in a violent form, with all the characteristic symptoms of voice and of mannerism

and of bearing. There aren't many of us of whatsoever age who could endure a sudden transition from discredited villain to persecuted hero without reflecting the change in our general deportment.

There were, on the financial side, compensations. By five o'clock the takings had grown to a gratifying amount. Scarcely a single customer, on departing, failed to place a cash contribution in the hands of the efficient treasurer. Nickels abounded, dimes were not infrequent, pennies helped to swell the sum total. One soft-hearted young lady, who made cooing, sympathetic sounds, tremendously enriched the collection with a silver quarter. As it chanced, she was the last paying visitor of the day. The master of ceremonies bowed her out politely:

"You kin come back tomorrow ag'in, lady, ef you want to enjoy him some more," he told her.

"That poor child!" she said. "Are they actually going to keep him chained up tomorrow, too?"

"Oh, yessum," he said, "ever' day frum now on, prob'ly."

Behind her back the star looked down fondly, almost lovingly, at his bright anklet. He lifted the limb and in his exuberance shook it so that his chain made a brave, gay little clanking sound that matched in well with the music of a handful of coins which he rattled together in his two cupped palms. His demeanor changed.

"Hey, you kids!" he shouted out, authoritatively, "how many times I got to keep on tellin' you that my father is liable to show up any minute now?"

You want to spoil ever'thing, looks like. You kids better git busy!"

Other members of the staff assisted the manager in striking the tent. Being struck, it resolved itself into two of Mrs. Custer's best company coverlids, fastened together with safety-pins, and somewhat damaged where pegs had been used to fix the side-walls to the turf. The pegs and the signboard were bestowed behind a convenient snowball bush. The workers finished their task just in time. Down the street they heard a warning shout from young Hewlett who, half an hour before, had been detached from his other duties for special picket service. Another half-minute and the federated shareholders, all enriched, all jubilantly calculating on further enrichment, had vanished.

The juvenile Thespian plainly had the protean knack. He slumped down upon the trampled grass, becoming instantly an image of grief. There, in a sad little heap, his braceleted leg tucked under him, his abashed face on his breast, his hands idly nursing a length of his chain, he was found by his father. Just this picture was needed to round out and complete Mr. Ferguson's remorse.

He came across the lawn and as he stooped to fit the key in the little padlock he caressed his son with comforting and commiserating pats upon the hunched shoulders.

"I reckon you've been pretty lonely, my boy," he said, contritely. "And pretty unhappy, too, I guess. Well, I haven't been any too happy myself."



He slipped the unfastened cuff off the leg and flung it aside.

"Come along," he said. "I guess you've learned your lesson. And if you haven't we'll have to try some other plan."

"Then you ain't goin' to do—this—to me tomorrow?"

Mr. Ferguson thought the quick start and the faltered words betokened relief. He put an affectionate arm around the still drooping form.

"No, boy," he said, "not tomorrow, nor any other day. Now then, brace up and don't keep on looking so miserable. I promise you this isn't going to happen again, ever—I'll send Dave right out to tear down these wires."

In a house in the next street an hour later, Master Custer somewhat diffidently addressed his father as that gentleman sat at ease reading the evening paper and awaiting the summons to supper.

"Popper," he began as he entered the living room; "say, popper; lissen, wontcher?"

Mr. Custer raised his head. "Well, what is it?" he asked.

"Er—popper, I was just thinkin' about somethin'."

"Oh, you were? Well, if you were thinking about begging for money you might as well put it out of your thoughts. It's been less than a month since you got your new acting bar and all those other presents on your birthday. And I'm not going to buy you a Flobert rifle and have you

shooting yourself or somebody else. I've told you that a dozen times already within the last week."

"But, popper, this time I don't want you to buy me anything a-tall. I just thought you might be int'rusted in—in somethin'."

"Well, this is indeed a historic occasion. What's on your mind, then?"

Making answer, his son looked away and spoke, with unwonted embarrassment, out of one corner of his mouth:

"Well, popper, I was just thinkin' of a new way—it looks like a mighty good way to me—fur a parunt to punish a boy."

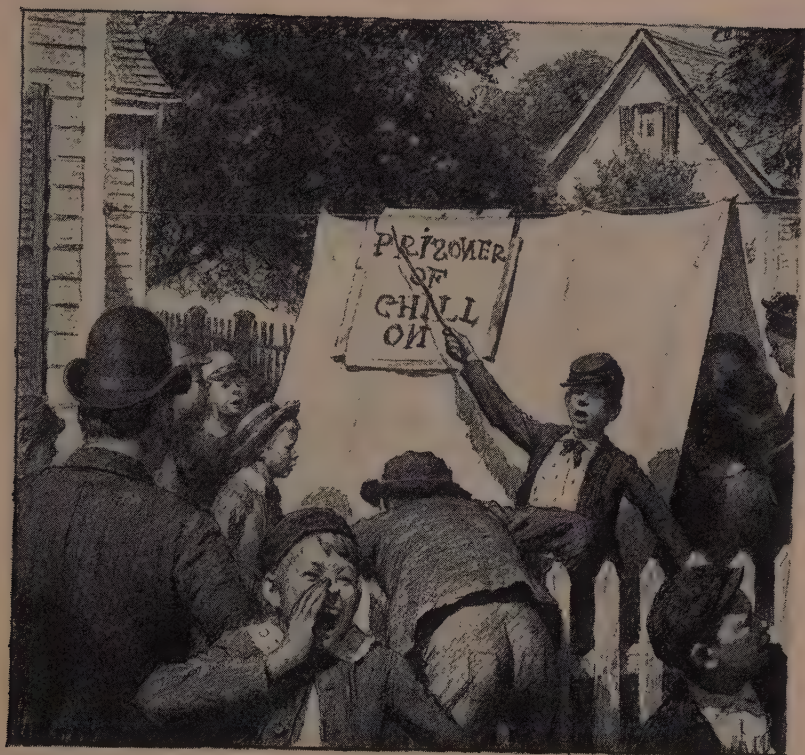
The startled Mr. Custer dropped his paper.

"How's that?" he inquired sharply. "From past experience I should think you'd be strongly opposed to all the old ways and all the new ways, too—if there are any new ways. Just what are you driving at, anyhow?"

"Well, suh, I was just kind of thinkin'——"

"Hold your head up and quit mumbling. What's come over this boy, anyhow? Now go on."

"Well, popper, I was just thinkin' that ef a boy misbehaved—run away frum home or somethin'—that ef his father was to git a chain—he could use that old well chain of ours that's out in the back yard ef he didn't want to spend any money on a new one, because it'd be plenty strong enough and long enough, too—and took and fastened it round his leg with a padlock—I guess you could borrow an old padlock somewheres or else maybe find one round the house—and was to chain him to a tree



BY FIVE O'CLOCK THE TAKINGS HAD GROWN  
TO A GRATIFYING AMOUNT.



or a wire or somethin' out in our front yard or some place like that, and was to keep him there awhile, that prob'bly it'd be a suvere lesson to him and——”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Mr. Custer spoke with emphasis. “Well, young man, I think I can guess where you got your notion, even if I can't figure out exactly what's on your mind—boys don't seem to be constituted as they were when I was a boy—but let me tell you this—an application of good old-fashioned peach switch oil to the under side of a boy's breeches is still going to be my favorite prescription. I've no desire to have a long-nosed preacher jumping halfway down my throat.”

As though reminded of something, he turned and through the open door hailed Mrs. Custer, who was in conference with Aunt Mallie at the supper table:

“Oh, I forgot to tell you one part of the story awhile ago,” he said to her. “It seems about four o'clock that new pastor of the Baptist Church showed up at Ferguson's office and told poor old pestered Eli that he had it on good authority that Eli's boy was chained up hand and foot to the wall of his house, and he went on to say he considered this cruel and barbarous treatment of a helpless child and unless Eli let the kid loose right away he'd feel it his bounden duty as a minister of the Gospel and a citizen to make a personal investigation of the circumstances and report the case to the police and speak out about it next Sunday from the pulpit. And so forth and so on.

From what I can gather, he must have scared Eli up considerably. And now here comes this youngster of ours with a crazy suggestion that I should lay myself liable to the same sort of a dressing down from the Reverend Mr. Busybody Hemingway. See here, Junior—why, where's the boy gone? He was here just a second ago."

It was on the day following that another event, seemingly in no wise related to the foregoing incidents, came to pass. That round-faced, mannerly, entirely inoffensive lad who was the son of the new Baptist minister was waylaid by the Ferguson boy, aided and abetted by five other boys, having the Custer boy for a ringleader, and while the rest stood by and loudly applauded what was done, the Ferguson boy, without apparent provocation and giving no reason for his conduct, did so despitefully use the Baptist minister's boy that the latter's nose badly was bruised, and he wailed loudly.



## *Chapter VII*

### ACCORDING TO THE BEST AUTHORITIES

**H**AD these recitals been cast in dramatic form instead of the simpler narrative style which the chronicler must follow, the rise of the curtain on this particular act would reveal the interior of a stable loft, previously referred to; and coincidentally our principal performer would be disclosed well down-stage in the company of two lesser performers, to wit: a crony and that crony's younger brother. The time would be in the forenoon of a blowy fair November day. The background for the scene would be a half lighted space under the sloped peaks of the roof; and there would be much hay about and a dovecote overhead and here and there slanted streaks of yellow sunshine showing through the walls where its ancient planking had warped. The plot—provided there could be any plot in a chapter lifted more or less at random out of the fourteenth year of a lively-minded male—would concern itself with a plan for seeking hidden valuables, gold preferably, or possibly a trove of precious stones.

There was formerly a great man who knew much about boys. Perhaps the reason why he knew so much about them was that in his heart he never

quit being a boy himself, not even when his hair had turned as white as the garments he liked to wear. And once upon a time he put it down in a book that into every rightly constructed boy's life there comes an hour when he has a raging desire to dig for buried treasure. Now then, in a later period three boys who lived in this town that was not so very unlike the town where he as a boy had lived, felt this same call. They were moved to go and do likewise; which they did, with results more or less far-reaching.

A good many years had passed between the time of the publication of his book in which he said this thing and the treasure hunt upon which these three boys went. Naturally in that long interval customs had altered. Indeed, we know that conditions must have changed, for conditions always are changing; but we may be very sure that boy nature had not. One is moved to believe that in any age and every age a boy's nature only changes as the boy himself does. To existant circumstances he brings the identical impulses and instincts which his ancestors brought to bear on their different circumstances in centuries past.

One of the greatest possible misapprehensions and one of the commonest is embodied in the statement by some middle-aged person—we hear it every day almost, delivered sorrowfully or scornfully or wonderingly—to the effect that boys these days are not as boys were when the speaker was young. They are, though; it merely is that he, with his eyes dimmed by forgetfulness or by ignor-

ance, doesn't know it. He isn't in the secret of his oncoming successors, that's all. He has become an outsider and never again may he hope to recapture the moods and the sentiments which he laid aside about the time he had his first shave.

So much for moralizing. A seer said once that all generalities are wrong, including this one. In this case, the outstanding and the concrete facts were three in number. One of those facts was Juney Custer and another was Earwigs Erwin and the third was the eight-year-old brother of Earwigs Erwin, who languished under the given name of Launcelot—his mother, when he was coming, had read English novels and liked them. But destiny had been kinder to this poor sufferer than his parent was; destiny measurably corrected the original grievance inflicted at the baptismal font by providing that among his own sort he should wear another name.

There were three of these brothers and out in the puerile world they respectively were known as Big Cuss, Medium-sized Cuss and little Cuss. But, except on those occasions when a group classification seemed desirable, the second Master Erwin, as already we know, usually was called Earwigs, or for short, Wiggy, or for very short, Wigs. Infrequently he also was called Tad. There are boys who go through all their days and never earn so much as a single nickname, which nearly always is their own fault. They are colorless; they lack tang and personality. There are other boys who collect nicknames as a cow's tail collects cuckleburs. Such

a boy was this middle Erwin boy, sometimes referred to as the inbetween one. This last, though, was not a title, really; adults occasionally employed it for purposes of distinguishing him from the remaining pair of young sons of Mr. and Mrs. H. J. Erwin.

"Well," he said now, in a tone which indicated that a given subject had been threshed out, "we might as well be startin', I reckon. Seems like there ain't any way to git rid of him." He cast a glare of enormous disapproval upon his small kinsman. "It's too dag-gone bad we got to have him taggin' along and prob'ly gittin' himself hurt and bawlin' round like a baby."

The object of this embittered complaint spoke up tremulously from his bed in the soft hay. For some minutes past he had figured as the chief topic of a whole series of criticisms carried on between the others in his presence and marked, on both sides, by a complete frankness so far as he was concerned.

"Now, Wiggy, you know whut mommer said ——" he began in a tense whine, then choked from wretchedness.

"Well, we're goin' to take you, ain't we?" said Earwigs. "Only, you needn't begin to bust out cryin' before we even git started."

"I sh'd say," stated Juney Custer severely. His manner of speaking was no less hostile than his confrere's had been. "It's liable to spoil ever'thing just by us havin' to let you go, too, without you blubberin' ever' step you take." His admonishing

expression changed; a rapt, absorbed look came into his face. You might almost call it a dreamy look. "I don't know as it's much use of our goin', anyway," he added. "Seems like all we been doin' ever' Sad'day this fall is just to go out in the woods gatherin' nuts—scalybark hick'ries or black wal-nuts or hazelnuts or somethin'."

"Well," asked the surprised Earwigs, "wasn't we 'spectin' to go after pecans today down in Farrell's Bottoms?"

"Oh, shuckins—pecans? We'll throw more'n a million chunks and sticks up in one of those old tall trees and we'll knock down about this many." He illustrated with his cupped hands. "Of course, ef we had a nigger man to go 'long with us and chop down a tree—why, then we might git some."

Such was one of the wasteful ways in those prodigal times. For the sake of a few bushels of the wild sweet nuts, men would fell a noble tree which had been a hundred years in the growing.

"Well, whut we goin' to do, then?" pressed his associate. "We've got our cold snacks already wrapped up in our pockets, haven't we? You didn't talk this way yistiddy evenin' after school when we decided we'd go today. Of course we didn't know then my mother was goin' to act so unreason'ble about this here brat here. Besides, everybody else in the gang is goin' to be goin' after nuts today."

"Well then, whut's the use of doin' whut ever' body else is doin'? Le's us do somethin' diff'ent—that's whut I been thinkin'." Having subtly paved

the way for it, the Custer boy offered his coup. "Le's go off huntin' fur buried treasure somewhere."

"Gee!" burst from Earwigs. The project took claim on his nimble imagination. "S'posin' we went and did and found somethin'?" His enthusiasm ebbed rapidly, though. "But then, look how somebody is always lookin' fur the Lost Silver Mine of Clark's River and not never findin' it. There's my Uncle Heck. He went lookin' fur it once't and come mighty near gittin' drowned in the back water. And besides that, ef anybody ever did find any buried treasure it natchelly wouldn't be anybody round this here old pokey town—specially fellers like us!"

Older persons than the in-between Erwin boy often are like that. To most of us romance is a thing that happened yesterday and may happen tomorrow but never by any chance happens today; and whenever it does happen, it chooses far-away spots better suited for adventure than those prosaic surroundings which encompass us. Perhaps, though, Juney Custer was of the stuff out of which poets are molded. Surely he had in him the spirit for high emprise. His counter-argument was prompt and, as it turned out, both conclusive and convincing.

"That just shows, Mister Smarty, how you don't know anythin' about it. How about 'The Treasure-Seekers of the Double Cipher' in Golden Days? They were only just kids, all except one or two. And wasn't it the littlest one of the lot that fin'lly



discovered where the money was hid at? Then there was a piece in the *Youse Companion* not so very long ago about 'a mere urchin'—that's whut the piece called him—finding the money that paid off the morgidge on the 'simple cottage of his aged parunts.' ” It was evident that in part he quoted from memory and somehow the quoting gave authority to his brief. “And how about Plucky Jack Fairweather in that there last Old Cap Collier librury that we read right up here in this very stable loft of mine?” He sank his voice to a cautious and guarded undertone, for now he dealt with those forbidden forms of literature erroneously characterized by adults under the common heading of dime novels. “Remember, don't you, whut Jack Fairweather did, after even Old Cap couldn't find the 'murdered miser's hoarded wealth'?”

“Oh, them old nickle libruries——”

“I guess *Golden Days* ain't any nickle librury, is it? And I guess the *Youse Companion* ain't, either. You don't have to read them on the sly, do you? You kin read them right out in front of your fambly, can't you? Well, I guess that settles that, don't it?” He sped his sharpest shaft. “And say, lissen here at me—how about Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island* goin' clear acrost the ocean and all by himself foolin' all those old pirates? I reckon ef that book wasn't ever' word of it true my own fater wouldn't a-given it to me fur a Chris'mus present last Chris'mus, would he? Wasn't Jim——”

“But there ain't any ocean round her, nor any

pirates, neither—only just some old rivers and creeks and bayous and things.”

“Well then, how about Tom Sawyer? Whut’d he do that time—him and Huckleberry Finn? Didn’t they find Injun Joe’s gold, just like it says in the book? And wasn’t Tom and Huck both of ’em boys, same as we are? And wasn’t Jim Hawkins a boy, too? Seems like to me, it’s always a boy that’s findin’ treasure where it’s hidden in a haunted house or on a desert island or somewheres like that. Well then, ef those other boys could find it whut’s the reason we couldn’t——” He broke off, for chance was furnishing power to his eloquence. “Looky, there’s a measurin’ worm crawlin’ down your laig!”

As regards the commoner insects there was a fixed code of beliefs. Locusts—the big green kind that left their dried husks clinging to tree bark—were to be avoided at all costs because they were very, very deadly, or at the least they had a deadly aspect. The devil’s race-horse was held in an even more fearsome repute. Had anybody said this creature was known to science as the praying mantis and was regarded as harmless, he would not have been credited. If a fever-worm traversed your path you must make a cross mark in the dust with your toe and spit in it; this warded off illness. And if a thousand-legs crawled into your ear while you slept—a favorite pastime of his, by all reports—either you must die or speedily go crazy. But a green measuring worm marching over your person was on no account to be dis-

turbed, but rather to be encouraged. For his presence was a promise. The crafty Juney pressed his advantage:

"Looky there at him. Watch how he's goin' right down your pants onto your stockin'! Now look, he's comin' onto my foot where it's touchin' you. Well, whut's a measurin' worm doin' round here when it's 'most winter time, ef it ain't a special sign? It's ag'inst the rules fur him to be out a-tall this time of year; so it has to be a special sign—a sign we're both goin' to git some new clothes somewheres. Our own famblies wouldn't buy us any more clothes, would they, when they've already bought us plenty fur the winter? So ef we got any more clothes we'd have to buy 'em ourselves, wouldn't we? Well then, where'd we git the money without this had somethin' to do with our findin' that there old buried treasure somewheres? I sh'd say." He swore his favorite oath: "Hod zickertee!"

He had made a proselyte—in fact, two proselytes. As Earwigs quit his couch and got on his feet, Earwigs' small brother likewise scrambled up with the air of being entirely committed to a most allureful undertaking. Upon him his elders immediately fixed baleful stares. In this quarter no convert had been looked for, nor one desired. Juney Custer's eloquence had carried him a step too far. The despairing stripling correctly interpreted the attitude of enhanced unpopularity in which he was being held.

"Now, Wiggy," he protested, and there was a

deepened pathos in what he said, "you know whut mommer said to you and whut you promised. She said——"

"She said ef he went gatherin' nuts he had to take you with him—didn't she?" It was the resourceful Juney who had interrupted the plaint. "Well, you see, we ain't goin' after nuts, so that lets you out, I reckon. Where we're goin' it's very important and we can't be bothered with any small childrun. So you just better be runnin' on back home where you belong."

The defendant took the one source of appeal left to him. He dissolved into tears and the sounds of distress were loud and very disconcerting. His brother tried shaking him violently, meanwhile hissing dire threats at him. The effect was to break up the continuity of his weeping but also to increase its volume as it came forth from him in jerky, anguished gusts.

In a desire for surface harmony, a compromise presently was reached. He might accompany his overlords if he behaved himself and agreed never afterward to tell anybody where he had been. Whether he should share in the distribution of any treasure which might be found was a matter for their superior minds, in good season, to pass upon. Temporarily he was made speechless through the effort to control the backwashes of his ebbing woe. He gave his pledge in a long snuffle, to which a final stifled sob was punctuation and a sleeve drawn across his nose was the accent mark.

## *Chapter VIII*

### OUR HERO GOES TREASURE-SEEKING

**I**T was after they had descended from the place of conference and passed through the alley gate that a new question arose. They had in their possession no mysterious chart or key to the whereabouts of hidden loot. There might be haunted houses scattered about—undoubtedly, in a town with a thirty-five per cent black population there must be some such; and by the gospel of Tom Sawyer, as they recalled it, beneath the rotting floor of a haunted house was where treasure most frequently would be unearthed. But the trouble was that for the moment they couldn't put a mental finger on the location of one.

In this stalemate the chief of staff had a suggestion to offer—however, not a particularly brilliant suggestion and destined for prompt rejection.

“Maybe ef we did like you do when you lose a marble and can't find it—you know, spit in your hand and then hit it with your finger and whichever way the most spit goes why that's where the marble is—why, maybe that might show us whut direction we'd better go in.”

“We ain't lookin' fur any ord'nary thing like a plain old simple marble, are we?” countered

Juneey. "I sh'd say not. Ef we spect to find treasure we got to go huntin' in one of the reg'lar ways or else we might as well not go a-tall."

"All right, then, you think of somethin'."

Juneey knitted his brows. "Well," he said at length, "Clark's River is too far away fur us to walk there. But seems like to me I heard my father say one time that out on Perkins' Creek, just past where the iron bridge is, is where some men uster all the time be huntin' fur the money that a famous desp'rado named John—lemme think—John A. Somethin'-other—hid it there way back yonder ever so long ago. Perkins' Creek ain't so far—we might try there. Only it would be a whole lot better ef we knew right where to start in diggin', because I reckon it would take us 'most a month, workin' ever' Sad-day, to dig up all along on both sides of the creek."

"Say, lissen!" exclaimed Earwigs. "Lissen here: My Uncle Heck was tellin' over home just the other night about an old man out at Maxon's Mills, where Uncle Heck is all the time goin' bird-huntin', that knows how to find water under the ground when people want to dig a well. He takes a branchin' switch and holds it, this way, in both hands, by the two ends where the forkedy part is, with the other end sort of stickin' out in the air in front of him—Uncle Heck he took the fire-tongs out frum back behind the parlor stove and showed me how he did it—and then he just walks around and walks around, sort of slow, and after 'while the end of the stick that's the furthest away frum



him begins to sort of bend down towards the ground without him touchin' it or anything. So he tells 'em to dig right there and sure enough before they go down very far they gen'lly 'most always find water. Maybe ef one of those switches kin find water it'd find hidden treasure, too."

"I betcher 'twould," assented Juney. "Only it must a-been some special kind of a charmed switch, wasn't it? I reckon just any plain switch wouldn't do."

"Wait, I'm tryin' to think," bade Earwigs. "Hod dog—now I got it! He said it was a which-hazel switch."

"Come on with me, then," commanded his friend with sudden decision. "I know whut we'll do next. Only we got to hurry."

"Say," expostulated Little Cuss, meanwhile stretching his short legs to keep up with the twain as they hastened out of the alley, "whut-all are we goin' after now?"

"Lay-overs to ketch meddlers," snapped his brother, irritably. "And 'we' ain't goin' after anything. Me and Juney are goin' after somethin' and all you're doin' is just taggin' 'long behind like a—like a tag-cat."

"But I thought out yonder to Perkins' Creek was where you just now said you were goin'," insisted the scorned encumbrance. "Whut are you goin' this way fur, Juney, please?"

"Cat's fur to make kittens' breeches," answered Juney, shortly. This was an even more dependable retort than the one just used by Earwigs. Indeed,

for it there was no known answer; it ended any debate.

Restraining a tendency toward renewed grief, the snubbed Little Cuss in dogged silence stumbled at their heels until they entered Roundtree's drug store. Say what elsewise you might for disparagement of him, this child had in abundance that quality which in ourselves we call determination and in others stubbornness.

That estimable person, Doctor E. P. Roundtree, would have laughed you to scorn had you in his presence predicted that one of these days a drug store would be a jumble of a place that is part a toy shop and part a notion counter and part a confectionery salesroom and part a dairy lunch—an establishment where you may take your choice of talking dolls, embroidered sofa pillows, novelty bathing suits, chicken sandwiches, vanity bags, banana-and-nut sundaes, art bracelets or a thousand and one other things, as your fancy inclines. Tell him that and he would have thought you quite mad.

Excepting during the three weeks immediately preceding Christmas, when he somewhat deferred to the spirit of the holiday season by offering a special line of plush albums with a deep rich nap on them, tortoise-shell manicure sets and gift books containing appropriate selections from standard poets or the culled treasures of the prose world, his was what its name implied—a drug store. “E. P. Roundtree, Drugs”—thus the sign read, and the bouquet of mingled pungent smells which escaped

from the interior whenever the door stood open helped further to advertise its main intents. Barring licorice root, no edibles were carried in stock and as to that, you couldn't exactly call licorice root an edible. It was meant for chewing purposes and you merely swallowed the juice which, as the saying went, "gathered" while you chewed.

There were a few, very few, sportive touches—one bottle contained an evicted tapeworm in alcohol and another containing a coiled tarantula, equally well preserved; also a stuffed rattlesnake skin and a mounted wood-duck on display in the show window between two great glass vases filled, respectively and translucently, with a green fluid and a red fluid, these by night having lights behind them so that, viewed through the darkness from a distance, Roundtree's rather suggested a vessel coming at you, bow on. In fact, the only bit of actual comic relief was to be found at the soda fountain—a spigot labeled "Don't Care." That was the proprietor's quaint device. When a countryman dropped in to be refreshed and, on being asked what syrup he desired, did not know enough to answer, say, "Plain sody—with vanilly," or "Milk shake, choc-late flavor," but in his embarrassment murmured, "I don't care," he was served a composite essence syphoned from a hidden reservoir back of this particular tap. But for most of the time Doctor Roundtree deported himself seriously, as befitting a man who pursued a profession so responsible as his was.

In his shirt-sleeves he emerged now from the

shelter of his walled-in prescription department to serve the three small callers who had just walked in.

"Well, buds," he inquired, "how do your corporosities seem to segashiate this morning?" The Doctor was in one of his humorous moods today.

"Yes, suh," politely answered the spokesman for the trio. "Doctor Roundtree, we want some which-hazel, please, suh."

"Some which?"

"Yes, suh."

" 'Yes, suh,' what?"

"Whut you just said, suh. I saw some in a bottle when I was in here th' other day with my father—right up yonder on that shelf there."

"Oh, you mean witch-hazel."

"Yes, suh. But we'd rather have some pieces of it—you know, switches or sticks—instead of the juice, if you've got it that way, suh?"

"Oh, no you don't—what you want is this here. You wouldn't know how to draw the extract from the wood; probably I wouldn't know myself. The liquid is the stuff you need. You apply it externally—rub it on, understand?"

"Yes, suh, that'll do, then."

"Well, how much do you want?"

"About enough to rub on a—well, on somethin'," stated Juney.

"Uh," grunted Doctor Roundtree. "Then I judge about fifteen cents' worth would be plenty."

He filled a vial from the larger container, drove in the cork, wrapped and tied the purchase and

handed it across the flat counter to Juney. "That'll be fifteen cents, son."

"Yes, suh, charge it, please, to my father."

"Let's see—you're John C. C. Custer's boy, ain't you?"

"Yes, suh."

"All right—just rub it on slow, son, and if it don't do the trick you come back here and I'll send up a dollar bottle of something stronger."

"Yes, suh." The purchaser marched out, accompanied by his bodyguards. On the sidewalk he halted and, ignoring the smaller of the pair, addressed the larger:

"See there—now us two don't have to bother with huntin' round ever'where fur a which-hazel tree that we prob'ly wouldn't know it when we saw it. Prob'ly all we got to do is just break off any kind of a switch and then rub this stuff on it, like he said. Hod zickertee!" An afterthought came to him. "And I reckon my father won't mind my chargin' it to him neither ef we come home all loaded down with money or jew'lry or somethin'. I sh'd say not!"

It would appear that this forehanded organizer overlooked nothing. He was the one who presently checked a swift gait to mention the need of tools suited to delving. A side detour by way of the rear premises of his home yielded a rusty shovel from the coal shed and a garden spade most highly valued by the Custer family's man-of-all-work, oneACY Gholson, colored. At this point Little Cuss became openly rebellious. He served notice that he

also must be furnished with a proper digging utensil or else he would hasten straightway to his mother and make full disclosure of the entire scheme.

Imaginably, there was no reason grounded on sanity why a fellow might not seek to enrich himself at no living person's expense. Still, you never could tell when parental bigotry would interfere with any cherished plan. Besides, for causes not exactly translatable into words this undertaking, or its earlier phases at least, seemed to demand absolute privacy; the very nature of it somehow called for secret proceedings on the part of all concerned. So the mutineer was appeased. In his hands was placed Mrs. Custer's favorite flower-bed trowel and with it an explicit warning that several exceedingly unpleasant things would happen to him if he lost or bent it or broke it.

The expedition then got under way, its members moving with an air meant to convey the impression that they were not going anywhere in particular and carried these present encumbrances with no real object but rather for the gratification of a passing hobby or fad.



## *Chapter IX*

AND LO AND BEHOLD, HE FINDS IT

**B**EYOND doubt persons who found buried treasure earned what they got; at any rate they earned it, conceded that they had to dig. Within an hour this truth impressed itself upon the consciousness of the coterie. During the next hour the impression deepened.

The preliminaries were not irksome. About them was a savor of excitement, feverish and throbbing. It required but a slight pressure upon the will to induce belief that a forked wand which had been torn from a willow on the creek bank and then carefully anointed with the colorless contents of the Roundtreeian bottle, inclined its limber tip toward a certain spot, after Juney, holding it loosely by its tines and accompanied by his two aides, solemnly had marched once and countermarched twice over a strip of boggy and brambly meadowland just beyond where the iron bridge spanned the stream.

This site had been chosen for the opening experiment because it had a wild and thickety look. Also, for the moment it was the only deserted field in sight. Above and below them and across on the opposite side of the gravel road they heard the

sound of firing shotguns and caught glimpses of dogs ranging the undergrowth—proof that more than one party of hunters sought to kill those desirable feathered tidbits which visiting Northerners persisted in calling quail. These persons even went so far as to speak of “a covey of bob-whites” when what they really meant was a bunch of birds or, by the Afric version, a “gang of pa’tt’iges.”

Where the pronged twiglet dipped was where actual toil began. It was toil, too; after the first few feverish minutes they could disguise it under no other name. The turf was bearded with briars and frosted weed stems and matted with tufts and twists of grass roots. Below, the soil revealed itself as damp and clingy, offering a sort of moist resistance against being disturbed. Very soon the feet of the treasure-seekers were wet and their legs muddied; and sweat ran down their faces and their arms began to tire. The job became routine, then it became monotony—and at eight or thirteen either, for that matter, a volunteer toiler needs variety to give his occupation zest.

Still, it was of record that Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn had similar vexations to contend with. Indeed, it was set forth how that they probed in several separate places before they had their reward. The director of operations cheered his force on to continued exertions by reference to this historic precedent. Also, from time to time he fretfully begged Little Cuss to get out of his way. But the difficulty was that no matter where the perverse underling squatted he got in somebody’s way.

However, the two ranking officers had no valid objections to offer when abruptly it occurred to Little Cuss that it must be time to eat. They left the tools on the edge of the shallow and sketchy-looking excavation and they withdrew to a convenient dry tussock and stretched their soaked legs on the earth and made equitable division of the food which had been brought, done up in paper wrappings, in their coat pockets.

Having first disposed of its crust and its outer portions, Juney was reserving for a last large noble bite the geometrical center of a slice of baker's bread, buttered and enriched thickly with crab-apple jelly. He seemed reluctant to engulf this ultimate mouthful. Perhaps he was reluctant because, for him, it would mark the conclusion of the meal. Or perhaps it was that since his earlier enthusiasm somewhat had flagged he would parley with himself for a truce of time before resuming a contract growing in anticipation more and more burdensome.

He held the morsel poised, nibbling daintily at loose crumbs and with the tip of his tongue licking up pendant drops of the half molten jelly. He would toy with it for just a minute longer. His aching muscles eased themselves. He spoke aloud, musingly, addressing no one in particular:

"Maybe there was somethin' wrong with us havin' a willow switch instead of a reg'lar which-hazel one. Maybe it might be better ef we sort of knocked off after a while and waited till we could borrow his one from that old man that your-all's

Uncle Heck knows about, that lives out at Maxon's Mills, that kin locate water with it. Maybe——"

He did not finish this sentence. A tall man was bending almost over him, looking down upon the luncheon party. Without being heard, this man must have come quietly out of the fringe of haws and horse weeds on the creek bank behind them. He wore a stained shooting coat and carried a gun in the crook of an elbow. A docile setter was stationary on four spraddled legs just behind him.

"Hello, kids," he said in a cordial drawl. "What brings you here?"

"Nothin' special," answered Juney, overcome and rigid with a sudden great embarrassment.

"Just sort of settin' here, suh," supplemented Earwigs, wriggling slightly. Little Cuss tucked his confused head down, saying nothing at all. But involuntarily the eyes of the older two turned toward the place of their recent labors.

The stranger looked where they were looking. His lips twitched. "Now, see here," he said; "that won't do. His tone, though, was friendly. "You surely have got some reason for being here. So then the question is—what's the main idea? Go ahead and tell me," he prompted. "I've got a right to ask—I happen to own this piece of ground, you know. But I'm not going to get mad at you—not going to poke fun at you, either. I was a kid once myself, a long time ago."

They relaxed slightly. Like most elemental creatures they were, after a fashion, secretive, and being elemental they furthermore dreaded above all



"YOU'VE BEEN HUNTING FOR BURIED TREASURE, HAVEN'T YOU NOW?"





things the ridicule of adult minds for their personal affairs.

"I tell you what I'll do," pursued the tall man, studying them closely, "I'll make just one guess. You've been hunting for buried money, haven't you now?"

"Yes, suh," blurted Juney, and restiffened. "But we didn't know that it was your land, suh, and we'll——"

"That part of it'll be all right," said the man. "I reckon you boys are not the only ones by a long shot that have come prowling round here during the last fifty or sixty years trying to find old man John A. Murrill's money chest. My father used to say it was in the blood of the people all over this section. But so far as I know you're the first to tackle the job here lately. Go right ahead when you're ready. It's my land but you're welcome to anything valuable you find on it. You see, boys, it's this way—I'm not much of a hand for scratching in the ground—at least, some of my industrious and thrifty neighbors seem to think so. Anyhow, this time of year I'm pretty busy shooting birds.

"I'll tell you what," he went on, with the note of affable sympathy stressed in his tone; "you boys come on with me up to my house just beyond that line of trees yonder. I keep a sort of bachelor's hall there. And I'll make my old nigger man that does the cooking and housekeeping for me give you chaps some nice fresh milk. Or how would a broiled bird apiece strike you?"

"We've just et, much oblige', suh," explained Juney.

"Oh, that doesn't make any difference. I never met the boy yet that couldn't eat again. When I was your age I was hungry all the time, seems to me. . . . Oh, I see you brought your tools along with you. Well, you can leave 'em right here—nobody'll bother 'em. And after we've had a bite together we'll all come back and you boys can go on with your digging and I'll look on. That's a favorite trick of mine—sitting by and watching somebody else work. Or at least so they do say. Pick yourselves up now and trot along; and on the way we'll get better acquainted. My name's Ripley. And my nigger man is named Uncle Pomp and this setter dog here is called Seekum."

His lazy manner of speaking was winning; he had a lazy way of talking, too, although his long easy steps somehow carried him forward briskly. The willing trio, already captivated by this gentleman who seemed so interested and so generous, realized that as they skipped in the wake of his broad strides.

What ensued made a splendid interlude in a memorable day. Uncle Pomp welcomed them and Seekum manifested joy in their acquaintance; the cluttered room where they ate was, to their way of thinking, one of the most admirable rooms they had ever visited. It was filled with such attractive smells—gun oil and leather and the appetizing fumes of frying. The cook stove was right there in the room with them, so that their host could reach

back and spear fresh hot corn pones from the pan without rising from the table; and Seekum and another dog which Uncle Pomp vaingloriously praised as "de very smartes" 'possum an' coon dawg in sebenteen counties" skirmished over the floor, snapping up the odd bits which Mr. Ripley tossed to them. It was altogether delightful. As the captivated Earwigs remarked to Juney: "Seems sort of a pity with a man that un'erstands so well this-a-way whut boys like, that he ain't got any boys of his own. Seems like a kid's parunts never are like this, somehow 'ruther."

He paid this tribute in the temporary absence of their entertainer. The latter had excused himself to go outdoors for a few minutes while Uncle Pomp was plying them with helpings of cold sweet potato pie and saucers of watermelon rind preserves. He was back again by the time they had finished. He seemed in no hurry, though, to head the return march to the creek side; nor were they. It was mighty fine to sit and listen in rapt attention while he told them stories of coon hunts in the bottoms at night and of the string of birds he killed and of that semi-fabulous monster of the early days, Murrill the Murderer, Murrill the Slave Runner, who according to the ancient tradition had made his lair and interred at least one caché of his ill-gotten and blood-stained gains right in this very vicinity. Under the spell of his friendliness Juney expanded and Earwigs did, too. Little Cuss tried twice to break in but on each occasion brutally was squelched by one of his seniors. Scarcely

realizing it, they made Mr. Ripley their confidant regarding the expedition, mentioning the various authorities.

"It would be mighty funny," finally he said, "if you-all should have hit on the very spot where that old scoundrel of a Murrill buried all those thousands and thousands of dollars, wouldn't it? Still, stranger things have happened. Huck and Tom Sawyer and this other boy, Hawkins, that you spoke of just now—they had just such streaks of luck, didn't they? That reminds me"—he took out his watch. "Say, youngsters, time is flying—here it is a quarter past three already; it gets dark mighty early these evenings. We'd better be hustling if you're going to do some more looking before it's time for you to start back to town." He settled his hat on his head; he had not removed it during their stay under this hospitable roof of his. "Let's move!"

That which followed practically overpassed belief. Hardly had they come to their diggings when Mr. Ripley pointed toward that section of the work where Little Cuss, with his trowel point, had made a ragged sequence of small pecks in the rough sod.

"Don't I see something round sort of shining right over there?" he asked. He stepped nimbly forward, stooped, picked up a small circular object, wiped the encrusted raw clay from it and held it up before their entranced eyes. "Why, what's the matter with your eyesight, boys?" cried Mr. Ripley. "Here's an old-time four-bit piece and it belongs to you, too—you are the ones who must

have dug it up even if you didn't see it, any of you. I'll keep it while you're looking for more like it. Now let's all get busy and search round here everywhere. I've changed my mind—I'll help."

They got busy, their spirits mounting and their fingers itching. Probably every human being is a treasure hunter at heart. But, singularly, their defect of vision continued. It was Mr. Ripley who found the next dingy half-dollar imbedded in a clod twenty feet from where the first piece had betrayed itself to his keen scrutiny; and fifteen minutes later his fingers closed on a third coin of like denomination and brought it forth from under a bamboo brier root at a farther point, heretofore untouched in the quest. That, however, was the last four-bit piece he found.

"Well," he said at length, "you know what it looks like to me? It looks to me like old Murrill's money must have got scattered some way. Probably the main part of it is in one place, but odd pieces seem to be spread around about everywhere." He glanced toward the west. "It's too bad that we'll have to stop pretty soon now; it'll be coming on dusk in a little while and I expect you're all due home before night, eh?"

Gravely and with ceremony he bestowed a coin upon each of them.

"Now I'll tell you what my idea is," he went on; "my idea is that turning up this whole flat is going to be a pretty big job for three shavers like you to tackle. So next time you come I think

you'd better take in some partners and bring them along to help you out. There ought to be enough treasure to go around. Still, I wouldn't tell too many if I were you-all—just a few of your chums that you can trust. Probably you'll be seeing some of your close friends at Sunday school tomorrow; you can pass the good word to them, then. But tell them not to tell anybody else, unless it happens to be some other boy that they've got confidence in.

“And then, next Saturday morning, bright and early, fetch your crew back here with you and go at it. I promise you I won't touch pick or spade to this place in the meanwhile—I may have remarked before that I'm not much of a hand for what some people call manual labor. Anyhow, the whole thing is yours by right of discovery, if you know what I mean? Here, you'd better take your spade and shovel and trowel with you. Leaving 'em here all week, they might get lost or stolen.”

Standing knee-deep in the withering herbage at the wayside and waving farewells, the free-handed Mr. Ripley saw them started on the home-bound route down the country road, now showing in the slanting sun rays as a broad tawny ribbon that was splotched with maroon patches where the grit had been blown clear of the red gravel metaling. Beneath his breath he chuckled when he saw how lightly their several feet, forgetting now to be tired, were spurning the dust as the owners of those feet alternately scampered and danced and, in an enchanted abandon, kicked up, heel-and-toe.

Still continuing to chuckle, Mr. Ripley went then



across the bottom and up through the guardian strip of woodland to his bachelor's hall. Arriving there, he lighted a lamp in the untidy, book-cluttered sitting room of the tumble-apart cottage and sat down and in a certain book of fables turned the pages until he came to a certain one of those fables—a fable having to do with a dying father and his two greedy sons and a vineyard; and the father's parting injunction to those sons, and, at the end of the same, the moral of the same.

He read it through, smiling as he did so.

## Chapter X

### THE FATE OF A LESSER POWER

**A** GAIN, were this an act of a play instead of being what it is, a plain narration, the curtain at this point would be lowered for one minute to denote the passage of six days.

In the afternoon of the sixth day, it being a Friday, that venerable black man who ministered to the lone bachelor of Perkins' Creek dismounted from a shabby and unwashed side-bar buggy at the front gate of the Custer home and, going around to the kitchen door, begged the favor of a word personally with the son of the household. He explained to the cook that purposely he had timed his visit with an aim to meeting the young gentleman coincidentally with the latter's return from school.

"Huh," said Aunt Mallie, "speakin' of that boy, he ain't never yere, seems lak, 'scusin' w'en you don't want him—then you finds him scramblin' round right under yore feet an' argufyin' wid you. The Good Lawd in Heaven Hisse'f couldn't keep up wid him onlessen He give over ever'thing else fur jes' that single puppus. I'll ast his maw—she mout know. But I doubts it."

However, Mrs. Custer did know. At any rate

she had an idea. It was in her mind, she sent word, that at the dinner table her son had announced he had pressing business with one of the Erwin boys—business which would require his attention between three-thirty and the supper hour—and therefore he had asked to be excused from the customary evening chore of bringing in kindling for tomorrow morning's grate fires. Her advice was that the messenger inquire at Mr. H. T. Erwin's, around the corner in Washington Street.

At this latter address Uncle Pomp interrupted a back-porch consultation for long enough to present his employer's compliments and place in Master Custer's hands an envelope, sealed and addressed.

"Boss man, he say they ain't no answer required," he explained, taking his departure.

In wonderment the recipient opened the envelope, finding within two enclosures. One of these, surprisingly, was a piece of currency; the other a folded sheet of notepaper closely written on both sides. Having with dilated eyes looked upon the denominating numerals on the greenback, Juney and Earwigs—for it was with Earwigs that he had been in private and important conference—smoothed out the letter. With heads together they read what was there set forth.

The manuscript ran as follows:

My dear Young Friend:—I am sending this message to you because I don't seem to be able to recall the last name of your two companions of Saturday past, if indeed I ever heard it mentioned.

I am afraid I have some bad news for you. It

will be of no use for you to return here tomorrow in accordance with my suggestion and resume your hunt for the treasure. If you can intercept [they fumbled over this word and then in concert spelled it out—i-n-t-e-r-c-e-p-t] any of those friends of yours who were invited to share with you in the prospective stakes of the venture, it might be well to tell them not to come either, unless it be for the sake of a country trip solely.

In confidence, strictly between ourselves, I am very much afraid that some of your chums must have let the cat out of the bag. In fact I suspect that more than one must have allowed the secret to leak out. From what I can gather through hearsay and general talk, a considerable number of young gentlemen of your acquaintance overheard news of the discovery made by your party while in my company the other day. The worst part of it was that grown men—eavesdroppers, no doubt—also in some manner learned what was afoot. You will no doubt remark to yourself that a great many grown people do make nuisances of themselves by purposely listening to things not intended for their ears and then going about afterwards gossiping. I agree with you.

Be that as it may, the main point is that once the word was unintentionally divulged to outsiders it must have spread with the most amazing speed. As early as last Sunday, probably within a very short time after your Sunday school had let out, some men arrived on foot from town in a seeming great hurry and invaded the very piece of ground which

was the scene of your recent search. These same persons returned bright and early Monday morning, reenforced now by many more, some of whom were complete strangers to me, while others were neighbors of mine who in passing along the county road must have seen what was afoot and, never asking my consent and never taking the trouble to ascertain whether prior prospectors' claims had been granted by me to anyone else, felt moved to take a hand. This was cheeky, wasn't it?

On Tuesday at one time I counted no less than thirty-four such trespassers digging with might and main in the field in question. To facilitate [the readers spelled again here—f-a-c-i-l-i-t-a-t-e] their operations it became necessary for these individuals to cut two ditches of considerable length and depth in order that the accumulated water in low spots might be carried off into the adjacent creek.

Practically without abatement this sort of thing continued until today when the number of hands engaged fell off materially, doubtlessly because by now the entire surface of the land had been spaded up and thoroughly explored. You would hardly recognize the place, could you behold it. It looks as though a thousand greedy hogs had been rooting there.

Not one of these interlopers, so far as I can learn, found any money whatsoever. It must have been that there was no money left. It is plain to me that by a remarkable coincidence you and your two team mates picked up what scattered coins remained. So you see, after all, you have been spared

much fruitless labor. Even big strong men—as I was able from a distance to observe—grew wearied under the prolonged exertions in that mucky field. Toward nightfall some of them looked very wilted indeed—I might even say exhausted, and decidedly out of temper besides. I understand that they quarreled over favored places to dig—muddy places, at that—and that there were one or two fights.

Personally, I have no complaint. The fact remains that a piece of land which before this was practically of no value whatsoever, being a sort of swamp hole, has now been drained and its top soil has all been turned up without any trouble or expense to me, so that in the spring I—or rather someone acting for me—will be able to plant grass seed or grain or other useful crops here. Inasmuch as I realize that I am indirectly indebted to your joint pioneering work—or should I say directly indebted?—for this result, and in the hope partially of mitigating any disappointment you may feel at the failure of your ambitious plans, I take the liberty of tendering herewith the accompanying gift of one five-dollar bill. Please accept and make use of this slight token of my esteem and gratitude in the spirit in which it is offered.

I hope very soon to see all of you again, for I heartily enjoyed having you as my guests the other day. Any time you chance to be passing this way I trust you may drop in on us—Uncle Pomp will have your names in the pot should you come at mealtime. I might add that I expect to have quite a nice watermelon patch out here next summer—



unless the person who has agreed to tend it on shares should fail me. He may do so—indolence is such a prevalent vice in this locality! But let us all hope for the best, and as an inactive but expectant copartner in this contemplated enterprise, I now invite you and your close friends to sample the ripened product. Kindly look upon that melon patch—in case, I repeat, there should be one—as your own. Seekum joins me in affectionate regards.

Your new friend and devoted admirer,  
Prentice Ripley

P. S. Looking back upon our enjoyable conversations together upon the occasion previously referred to, I seem to recall that the gentleman who wrote about Tom Sawyer is one of your favorite authors. It may interest you to know that the gentleman who wrote Aesop's Fables is one of mine.  
P. R.

"Gee whil-i-kins!" said Earwigs, with tremendous feeling.

"Hod zickertee!" said Juney, softly.

"Watermelons whenever we want 'em next summer—oh gee!" murmured Earwigs. "And maybe some of these times Uncle Pomp might take us coon huntin' and we could camp out in the woods by a fire all night!"

"And then this five dollars more right spang on top of the half-dollar apiece we already got," recounted Juney with the manner of one tallying up his blessings. "Of course," he added, "it ain't as

much as whut Tom and Old Huck got that time."

"Still, said Earwigs, "it's a whole lot fur a couple of fellers to be gittin' round a town like this one is, where excitin' things don't never seem to happen like they do in those far-off places that you read about."

"I sh'd say," agreed Juney, caressing the green-back lovingly; "and then besides that, ain't we been saved all the trouble of diggin' and diggin' and diggin' all over that old piece of ground?" He slipped into a musing state. "I wonder—I wonder how so many people could 'a' found out about it all?"

"I betcher I know," declared Earwigs. "It must 'a' been that pleg-takid little old young brother of mine. The fellers we told were all as old as we are—fellers in our own gang. Well, fellers that they're old enough to be in the Fifth grade, certainly I guess they'd know enough to keep still about a thing that'd been told to 'em as a secret. But I betcher anything that that blamed kid just went round blabbin' his mouth off ever'where—you know?—amongst childrun not any bigger prob'ly 'n whut he is." He glanced over his shoulder, making sure that the pestiferous minor was nowhere within sight. "Well, just fur that it'd serve him right ef he didn't git any of this here five dollars."

"I sh'd say not!" stated Juney. "Didn't we tell him before we even started that us two would be the ones to decide how much he could have? Besides, he's already had a half-dollar, ain't he? Seems to me a whole half-dollar is a heap fur a kid his age

to be havin' all at one time. Just by itself, that's enough to spoil him! Give him any more and prob'ly he'd just waste it on foolishness."

"You betcher," affirmed Earwigs. "Whut would a kid that only just a few months ago he was hardly eight years old know about handlin' money? It'll be better fur him ef he don't never know anything a-tall about this extra treasure."

Long, long afterwards, following a Great War, some of the lesser nations of earth were to figure in practically a similar discussion on the part of the Powers—with practically the same outcome, as regards the division of the spoils of conquest.

## *Chapter XI*

### A FORENOON WITH A REFORMED CHARACTER

ON THE opening day of the young year a reformed character walked abroad looking for helpful deeds to do. It was John C. Calhoun Custer Junior, and the first thing he did was to let a fierce dog out of Mr. Lem Tyree's front yard. This was in the morning shortly after eight o'clock and marked the dedication of a series of thoughtful acts all designed to promote happiness and well-being among our dumb animal friends.

Since the day was New Year's Day, it naturally followed that Christmas had lately come and now was gone. It came with a lagging step, as was its way, and it went with a swift one, as also was a way Christmases had. It was heralded in, Christmas Eve, with a great blowing of tin horns and a great beating on of tin pans by bands of marching serenaders who from time to time interrupted their chivarees to lift front gates off the hinges and shift unanchored street signs and ring door-bells violently and then run away. It was greeted at sunrise with the popping of firecrackers and the hissing of spittin' devils, which continued and grew in volume so that through all of Christmas Day the air of the residential districts was being shattered

by brisk reports and made heavy with burnt Chinese smells. It passed, after night had fallen, to the rocket's red glare and the Roman candle's outburst of flaming rain.

In these parts and those times the prankish ma-rauderings of Hallowe'en and the gunpowdery ratifications of Fourth of July, as carried on above Mason and Dixon's Line, were combined to give zest and variety to the festival of Christmas. Also, as counter-distinguished from the curious holiday habits of the Northerner who, it would appear, went about fatuously wishing others a Merry Christmas, there was prevalent here the fascinating custom of Ketchin' People's Chris'mus Gif"—a sport in which children and colored persons excelled.

Through the Christmas, Juney had pursued the customary rounds of pleasure. He had hung up his stocking—with the gently contemptuous gesture of one who long, long ago fathomed the laughable fallacy of this Santa Claus business; but at dawn had risen, wearing an air much less sophisticated and infinitely less mature, and had hurried to the parlor mantel to see whether the stocking and the jeweled tree which stood close by it bore certain articles of presentation earnestly desired by him.

It was as though on the night before an elderly individual had retired to rest, rather bored by folklore and popular myths, but willing, for the sake of the totlets of the world, to give his tolerant endorsement to an agreeable and a pretty if an exploded fable; and then, next morning, a very much younger person, all thrilled and expectant and car-

rying in his breast the bright lights of the Yuletide spirit, had risen from the couch whereon that blase oldster laid him down nine short hours before.

Not until toward dusk of Christmas Day did he reassume the more studied pose. The torpidity induced by overworked gastric juices now had him in thrall. It better would accord with general conceptions were it possible to state that he became violently unwell as a consequence of gorging at the dinner-table; this, however, would be untrue. At thirteen—and you may write this down for future reference—what one can swallow, one—nearly always—can digest. So the stomach of our hero did not ache; merely it felt swollen and hard-put. A gentle lethargy possessed him. It seemed to him as though much time had passed since the hour of his rising.

The five days ensuing were given over to various attractive devices. Careful celebrants had saved some fireworks for use during Christmas Week. Juney, being numbered with those prodigals who expended their in one glorious forenoon riot, visited about among his more frugal friends and here and there assisted in the expenditure of a husbanded store of explosives. He did more than assist; he was perfectly willing to take complete charge. The concluding hours of the expiring year found him with a handful of blistered fingers and with the left eyebrow practically singed away; likewise they found him somewhat disappointed that much colder weather had not been vouchsafed—a pair of skates having been included among his re-



cent benefactions—and with little to look forward to except the prospect of going back to school and to humdrum things on the Monday following.

In this moment his mind was as a field fit for sowing with good seed; almost anything which held out a hope of novelty would receive a welcome from his consciousness. So, when his mother, coming home after seeing to the final decorations for the watch service at her church, was timely moved to speak of noble intents the words touched responsive chords in her son's being. It is your sinner who is jaded and not your sinner still joying in his transgressions whose soul quickens to the prospect of repentance.

"Junior," began the lady, "tomorrow is New Year's."

"Wellum, don't I know it? Seems like the Chris'mus don't any more'n git started in than it's already over with."

"Perhaps you don't know that New Year's is when everybody should turn over a new leaf?"

"A new which, mom?"

"It's a way of saying you're going to make new resolutions for the future. So I want you to decide right now that, beginning bright and early tomorrow morning, you're going to be a better boy."

"Shuckin's, mom, whut d'ye want to come pickin' on me fur? I ain't been doin' nothin'!"

"Oh, well, so far as that goes, I suppose you're not very much worse than the run of boys your age. Of course, in spite of everything I can say and do, your grammar is perfectly atrocious. And when it

comes to keeping your clothes tidy you seem to be absolutely hopeless. And you are forever arguing with older people. And the way you interrupt your elders is——”

“Why, mom, I don’t never argue. But ef people come tellin’ me whut they think, I got a right to tell ’em back whut I think, ain’t I, mon? There’s two sides to every question—I’ve heard you and popper say so. Just tellin’ somebody whut you think ain’t arguin’—is it, mon? It’s just tellin’ ’em, that’s all. I reckon ever’body’s got a right to go do their own thinkin’ about things. And how’re other people goin’ to find out whut you think without you tell ’em so, especially ef they bring up the subject first?”

“That will do, Junior, you’re arguing now. And I do wish you’d try to cultivate better manners—like Glenn Tally, for instance. He was with his mother at the church this evening, helping her, and he’s no older than you are and yet such a soft voice and such beautiful manners I never saw in a boy.”

“*Huh*, that sissy! I wouldn’t be like him no more than nothin’ a-tall.”

“He’s a dear.”

“Any boy that gits himself called a dear is bound to be a sissy. Why, mom——”

“Junior, hush; it’s not becoming in you to be saying unkind things about one of your playmates behind his back.”

“I could say it to his face and double-dog dare him to take it up—and he wouldn’t. He’d be skeered.”

"And quarreling and fighting—those are very bad habits, too. If ever there was a boy who ought to turn over several new leaves, seems to me you are that boy."

"Wellum, whut d'ye want me to do? I'm willin' to try doin' somethin' only you can't expect a feller all at once to quit doin' ever'thing that it's natchel fur him to do. I'd just as lief be down sick in bed."

"You'd have to be." She cast about in her mind. "Well, why not resolve that hereafter you'll be kind to animals?—that's a beginning."

"Whut kind of animals, mom?"

"Almost any kind. For one thing, you could promise not to collect birds' eggs any more. Goodness knows, there are plenty of other things for you to collect—postage stamps and tin tags and cigaret pictures and I don't know what-all. If I live to be a thousand I'll never forget the awful litter of rubbish I found in your bottom bureau drawer the last time we did house-cleaning. Just stop to think how the little mother bird must suffer when boys steal her eggs!" Mrs. Custer wagged her head so briskly at the thought of the barbarity that both the stuffed meadow-larks on her best hat quivered.

"There won't be any birds' nests fur me not to collect the eggs frum 'em fur sev'ral months yet," said her son. He would cross that bridge when he came to it; spring was a long way off. "You better think of some other kind of animals besides bird eggs, mom, ef you 'spect me to start in in the mornin'."

"Well, if you see a lost dog or a stray cat or a

crippled sparrow surely you can do something for it. And if you see a man mistreating a horse or a mule you can beg him to stop. And if you see other boys being cruel to any helpless brute you can ask them to stop."

"Ask 'em nothin'!" The vigilante role was beginning to present itself in an attractive light. 'Ef it's some boys I know I won't stop to ask 'em. I'll just walk up to 'em and I'll haul off and——"

"No, I don't want you to fight with them—that would be wrong, too. All you'll have to do is to explain to them in a pleasant, friendly way how wrong it is and they'll stop. And—and here's another idea:" The good woman was inspired by the absorbed look which had set itself on her son's face. How was she to know that at this moment he was pondering on the abysmal ignorance of grown persons as regards practical methods for influencing masculine youth? "It's an awfully nice idea: You keep count of the times when you try to help some animal and put it down in a little book to remind you of what you've done; and you'll get a beautiful reward for it, too."

"Reward? Say, mom, are you honest goin' to gimme somethin' that I want ef I do whut you say? Hod zickertee! I reckon I better begin right now thinkin' up whut I'd like to have the best."

"I don't mean that. I mean your reward will be in your own conscience. You'll feel so much happier. It always makes people happier when they do some worthy thing. There's the most comforting feeling comes to them. You try it and you'll

see for yourself. And you'll be an example to other boys."

So thus it has been explained why, immediately after his New Year's breakfast, an ardent young recruit to the forces of humane endeavor passed through Locust Street vigilantly on the outlook for excuse to exercise his powers in behalf of birdlet or beastling.

Before he had traveled far from home an opportunity was presented. Less than two squares away lived Mr. Lemuel Tyree and family. Now then, among other distinguishments, Mr. Tyree was renowned for being the owner of a most belligerent dog. This was not a very large dog; its fiery disposition was out of all proportion to its size. Also, its antecedents were mixed. Undoubtedly nature had designed that the dog under discussion should be a fox terrier; but even nature is not above having its little jokes. In shape and in size the dog suggested an ancestral strain of terriers, but it had a woolly and bristling head, and a tail which was a waving hairy pennon—in short, such a tail as shepherd dogs usually have; and it was of all the colors that a smallish fice may well be without becoming absolutely freakish in ground pattern. For reasons not altogether clear to Juney's generation Mr. Tyree called his dog Scandal.

Scandal had that same exaggerated idea regarding the extent of his master's possession which dogs so often do have. With him it was a fixed belief that Mr. Tyree owned not only the Tyree house and lot and all appertaining thereto, but likewise per-

sonally owned a stretch of the otherwise public highway upon which the property abutted. Accordingly, and because of this conviction, it was the habit of Scandal to lie in wait on the uppermost step of the front porch of his place of residence and to launch violent attacks upon those passers-by whom he regarded as objectionable. If a vehicle rattled along, making unseemly and disturbing noises, if a pedestrian lingered suspiciously on the sidewalk fronting the estate, and especially if some other dog appeared on his side of the street, Scandal became outraged beyond control. With every hair in his pelt erect, with his teeth all bared and his body quivering and his vocal passages emitting a fearsome medley of growls and barks, he charged down upon the reckless intruder.

Just one thing stood between him and his foes—a stout fence of narrow wooden uprights, too close-ranked for him to wriggle through and too high for him to scale. But as testimony to his passion for privacy the grass was quite worn away at the base of the fence on its inner side where he had raced back and forth, striving to reach the enemy, and there was a continuous greasy streak upon the pickets at the approximate height of his muzzle; this to prove how earnestly and how frequently he had panted forth his threats and his hatreds. If the invading dog were inclined to ways of peace he would hasten thence at the first warning snarl; if of a quarrelsome sort he would offer combat, so that for a space of minutes there would be offered the spectacle of two of the most infuriated dogs in the





THE GOOD WOMAN WAS INSPIRED BY THE  
LOOK WHICH HAD SET ITSELF UPON HER  
SON'S FACE.



world tearing up and down a fence, one within it, the second beyond it, their noses almost touching and each loudly demanding to shed the other's blood.

Eventually the outside dog would weary of a battle so bloodless, or else all at once would remember the business which had brought him into this vicinity. He would withdraw, pursued, though, for so long as he remained in hearing, by the taunts of the inside dog calling after him that he was a craven. His duty done, Scandal, walking stiffly and still giving vent under his mustache to hostile mutterings, would return to the post of watching, there to await the next intrusion. A dozen times an hour, a hundred times a day, he made the onslaught. Life for him was just one desperate foray after another.

One of these bitter but ungoried controversies broke out just as Juney drew near. A whitish yellow cur previously unknown to Juney and slightly smaller than Scandal was offering hearty defiance to the latter. As one whose interest in all neighborhood phenomena was lively and constant, Juney often had observed how artificial barriers had balked Mr. Tyree's dog of vengeance and vaguely, more than once, had wondered how far his fury might carry this dauntless dog if only he were not thwarted by circumstances over which he, as a dog, had no control. In his present capacity, i. e., that of a lover of all animal kind, his latent curiosity gave way to a quick sympathy. He decided to play the part of a friend. For once at least Mr. Tyree's dog

should not suffer disappointment, for once should have his way with a trespassing upstart.

He waited until the bloodthirsty pair, hyphenated by the intervening fence into a compound expression of mutual dislike, had scuttled away to the farther limit of the Tyree yard. Then Juney ran briskly forward to the middle breadth of paneling, unlatched the front gate, swung it widely ajar and retreated a few paces to await results. Back his way came now the adversaries, each continuing to breathe harsh sounds down the other's hot throat. Naturally, they figured on an unbroken continuity of the fretted screen between them; suddenly both came to an unexpected gap. Out through the opening Scandal lunged—out and smash up against the stranger and, as they met in an impetuous head-on collision, he gave utterance to a shrill yelp.

To Juney, this outcry on the home-defender's part appeared to betoken joy mingled with gratification. Instantly, though, the boy realized that he had been deceived—that Scandal was voicing, not exultation, but surprise, horror, dismay, chagrin. Also Scandal, in an effort to halt and reverse, had sat down and was sliding so fast over the pavement that almost his distressed hinderparts seemed to smoke from the friction. And now the shocked mongrel, with that bannered tail of his at half-mast, had scrambled up on all fours and had turned himself about and had seemed to flinch into half his ordinary length and was streaking across the frost-bitten sward of his master's yard, loudly pleading

for help and mercy as he went—a dog preyed on by conflicting emotions, if ever there was one, and all shrunk up in the effort to express them simultaneously while moving at great speed. The strange dog, promptly recovering from his own astonishment, darted after the fugitive, snapping his jaws a matter of scant inches behind those scorched haunches. Under the Tyree porch sped the clamorous Scandal. His pursuer did not follow him although plainly his intention had been to do so.

What deterred him was that, as an upper front window went up with a bang, a human voice bade him begone. The words used by the voice included the words “shoo” and “scat,” which are words for hens and cats rather than dogs. But every dog knows when he is on alien premises and in such cases follows a definite procedure. This dog departed hurriedly. Juney felt that he, too, should go away. Behind him he heard sharp comments spoken by Mrs. Tyree, for it was she who had thrown up the sash.

“I saw you, you little ruffian! With my own eyes I saw you deliberately letting that nasty brute in here so he could attack our dog! I’m a great mind to go right straight to your mother and tell——”

But Juney, moving at a brisk trot and looking straight ahead of him, was now around the corner where Washington Street met Locust. He had deemed it the part of wisdom to offer no explanation of his motives. With the surface evidences so plainly against him he knew that explanations would be difficult; almost surely his motives would

be misinterpreted by an accuser already deeply prejudiced. But down inside himself he had a gentle glow. Despite the outcome he looked upon his deed in the light of a worthy and commendable deed. He had missed what conceivably might have been a first-rate dog fight but, on the other hand, he had bared the false pretenses of an imposter. And in revealing frauds there is merit. The Persians have a proverb to that effect.

Washington Street, being partially explored, yielded no visible prospects for a second experimental step in the good cause. It wore a Sunday calm and was for the most part empty. Such stores and shops as he passed were closed and shuttered; and to such acquaintances of like age as he encountered the zealot gave a perfunctory salute and went his solitary way along. Later, he might or might not seek to enlist confederates in the campaign for kindness; it all depended. First, the workability of the project must definitely be tested. Taken by itself, a single satisfactory demonstration was not enough; he sensed that. As an isolated instance it had revealed the general beauty, the fine nobility of an abstract principle; but a continuing validity must be revealed through further practise before he cared to solicit cooperation. He was venturing into foreign fields and over hitherto untrodden paths; there would be peril of ridicule from the unthinking and the skeptical until such time as he had concrete and cumulative evidence to present.

He walked slowly, with a keen scrutiny for his



surroundings, but the vista continued to be barren of possibilities. Mark you, though, we have the very highest authority for it that those who with diligence seek, eventually shall find. A task for those ardent hands to do was waiting, not an eighth of a mile distant.

Still alertly but vainly spying out the land, he came abreast of a squatty brick building abounding in signs of having lately been constructed. Horse-cars and gas street lamps had served his fathers before him, but in the spring there would be trolley-wires up on at least three main-traveled thoroughfares. So the new power-house was almost done and in its doorway stood Mr. Dave Simons, the new superintendent of the new company.

In a way of speaking, Juney enjoyed this gentleman's acquaintance; he had been one of the volunteer overseers of succeeding phases of the plant's construction. Older onlookers might have been critical as to architecture and other details but Juney's group warmly endorsed the entire undertaking, with its cheerful bustle of artisanry and its agreeable smells of raw materials and its fine facilities for swarming up on scaffoldings and delightfully risking one's neck in skipping flights across the naked floor rafters of the second story. For providing thrills, Juney regarded a building going up as second only to a building burning down. All his clan did.

So he felt that he knew Mr. Simons fairly well. Indeed, on numerous occasions they had had speech together; that is to say, Mr. Simons had, this time

or that, violently ordered him to climb out of something—a mortar bed, say—or to come down off of something or to get away from something else and stay away from it; had even pledged himself once or twice to skin Juney alive provided he could catch him. But there had been no malice in it; it was plain that the pestered man liked boys and had a whimsical understanding of them. And men who understand boys, even partially, always had been rare and lately had seemed to be growing rarer. This particular boy distinctly was pleased that he now should be recognized.

“Hello, son,” said Mr. Simons; “going anywhere in particular or just knocking about?”

“No, suh,” said Juney. “I mean, yes, suh.”

“Fooling ’round with nothing to do, eh?” interpreted Mr. Simons. “Well, that’s my fix, too. Seems like I can’t stay away from this shebang, even on a day like this when the contractors’ gang’ve knocked off and there’s nobody else here but my nigger fireman. Must be in the blood—my old daddy was the same way. He was a locomotive engineer down here at Fulton and when he got a day off he’d go across to the yards and ride on one of the switch engines. He’d pack his dinner bucket with him and stay till dark. I heard of a letter-carrier once, over in St. Louis it was, that used to spend his vacations taking nice long walking trips across country. I guess he must have been some kin to our family. Well, anyhow, I’ve been loafing here killing time by watching some crazy-looking chickens . . . Hello there, I see you’ve been cook-

ing one of your eyebrows! Did they take you off the stove before you were done—or do you just naturally like a face fried on one side?”

Juney grinned feebly. He was embarrassed by the jest and yet finely pleased at being made the object of it. He dug a boot-toe in the earth. Then realization of his present responsibilities stirred within him. Mention had been made of certain presumably feeble-minded fowls—perhaps here there might be chance for kindly ministrations.

“Was you sayin’ somethin’ about chickens, Mr. Simons?” he asked.

“Sure. Right yonder at that next door place.” He waved an arm toward a latticed enclosure flanking the power-house grounds on the left. “Go over and give ’em a look, kid—it’s worth it.”

It was worth it, too. Through a crevice in the criss-crossed lathing Juney squinted and beheld a flock of feathered creatures which, by his standards, more were fitted for exhibition in a traveling menagerie than as ornamentation of a private citizen’s hennery. There was a perfect drum-major of a cock, as large almost as a young turkey gobbler, and he had vast thick legs, legged clear to the feet with feathers, and on his head a splendid cockade which drooped its fronds down over his eyes, and from his half-buried comb to his yellow toes he was all of a lustrous white. There were six members of his harem, they likewise being all of augmented size and in plumage only slightly less gorgeous than their lord. But their lackadaisical behavior did not match with their exterior splen-

dor; even with one eye, the witness squatted at the peephole observed this. The sultan moped in a far corner of the seraglio; his concubines looked strangely droopy and their eyes were dulled under their snowy crests. It was as though their own beauty bored them.

"Hod dog!" exclaimed Juney, properly moved by a spectacle zoologically so impressive and yet viewed without cost. "Do they belong to you, Mr. Simons?"

"Not so as you'd notice it," disclaimed that gentleman. "The side-show business is out of my regular line. No, those circus freaks belong to a man named Willingham. He moved in next door a couple of weeks ago. His family's coming along a little later after he gets settled, so he was telling me just a few minutes ago. Well, he hadn't any sooner than got his household plunder unloaded than he was out back, building that stylish-looking chicken yard and painting it all up and fitting it out with those special feeding boxes that you can see scattered around over the ground and with a patent drinking fountain, as he called it—it's that pottery thingamajig sitting there on this side of the pen—and otherwise making the whole outfit grand and glorious.

"And then, day before yesterday, he got that batch of chickens by express from somewhere and turned 'em out and ever since he's been spending most of his time in there with 'em, fussing over his pets and appealing to their better natures. I judge he's what you'd call a fancy chicken fancier. I've

heard of 'em before but he's the first incurable patient I ever saw. But his new flock won't behave according to specifications, seems like. Something seems to be ailing them. They won't lay eggs and they don't seem to have much ambition in any general direction. Either they haven't got over the train trip yet—they call it car sickness—or they don't care for this climate or, maybe, being expensive and high-bred, they just naturally don't give a dern. They look like to me they've been saying to themselves: 'Well, if this party can afford to pay the price that we fetch, he can afford to buy his own eggs. Our job is just to look pretty and take life easy.'

"Willingham is beginning to act like he was going to be plum outdone with 'em before long. He's doctored 'em and pampered 'em with special vittles and shifted their roosts around in new places and still they don't show but mighty little interest in his efforts and no appreciation at all. You'd a thought even a top-knot rooster would have more sense of gratitude. But no, not any whatsoever. But our friend hasn't altogether lost heart yet. Just before you showed up he put out for down-town, hoping to find one of the drug stores open so's he can buy a medicine that he read about in a book he's got on the habits and customs of pedigreed chickens. I didn't tell him so—I didn't want to discourage the poor fellow—but it looked to me like he wasn't going to have any luck. My judgment is that he's invested his good money in a gang of born loafers.

"Well, kid, if you've looked at that sight long enough, come on here with me and I'll show you how our plant shapes up inside, now that we've got the fire going under the boilers and are getting the dynamos and the machinery and all tuned up. You superintended her when she was being put up; you might as well give us your final O. K. before we throw on the full power for the test-out."

In the pleasurable absorption of the next half-hour Juney forgot his main actuating purpose. What recalled him to it was a thing that happened after he had finished his inspection.

"Everything satisfactory?" asked Mr. Simons solicitously.

"Yes, suh."

"Machinery look all right to you?"

"Yes, suh."

"And you can't suggest any changes before we go ahead and finish laying the tracks?"

"No, suh, I b'leeve not."

"Well, that *is* mighty comforting," said Mr. Simons, with the air of being greatly elated; the twinkle in his eye was masked. "Here, son, hold this little wire in your hand a minute, will you?—there, that's the way—while I step over here and wind up the other end of it."

Suspecting nothing, the flattered boy obeyed. An instant later he uttered a loud "Ouch!" and, casting the treacherous wire from him, rubbed his tingling hand against a breeches leg. From behind a mess of metal mechanisms Mr. Simons emerged, grinning broadly.



"Touched you up, eh?" he asked. "Well, if I'd a' given you a little more of the juice, or if you'd been standing on the damp ground instead of on this dry floor, you'd have gotten quite a jolt—you couldn't have turned that wire loose until I shut off. I just wanted to give you a lessen not to fool with things around a power-house in case you favor us with your company in the future. You might pass the word along to your pardners, too. Electricity is a good thing but it's like a lot of other good things—you don't want to overdo it. I wouldn't be surprised but what the little taste I gave you toned up your general system quite a bit. How about it?"

"I reckon so, suh," assented Juney dubiously. He moved cautiously to a clear space, taking due care to brush against nothing on the way. "Much obliged to you, suh."

"Yes sree," continued Mr. Simons, "electricity is a mighty fine thing, taken in moderation. You've heard of galvanic batteries, haven't you?"

Juney shook a puzzled head.

"Well, most doctors have 'em. And certainly you must have heard about electric belts?"

"Yes, suh, I know about them. The nigger man named Oscar that our cook's married to, he wears one round his waist under his clothes. He's got such a misery in his back he can't work and he's always takin' medicine fur it. But it don't seem like it does him any good. But our cook bought him a 'lectric belt fur a Chris'mus gift and he's got it on now and he told me only yistiddy that he feels a whole heap better already—'cept when he tries

to do any work. Only whut he really wanted fur Chris'mus was a guitar."

"Aha, just what I was telling you," said Mr. Simons. "I wouldn't be surprised but what he gets so much better after a while that he can bear to sit down and watch somebody else work without feeling a single twinge in that poor weak suffering back of his. Now, f'rinstance, you take——"

"Say, Mr. Simons, say, lissen please, suh," Juney broke in. To him, like a bolt from the blue, a compassionate inspiration exactly in accord with his new-born motives had come leaping. "Whut's the reason it wouldn't be good fur those chickens over yonder next door ef they had some of this here 'lectricity juice, too?"

"Well, boy, that's an idea, sure enough," agreed Mr. Simons. His face broadened in a slow grin. "But wouldn't you feel sort of mean, playing a joke on those melancholy homesick things?"

"I wouldn't do it fur a joke—no, suh," proclaimed Juney piously. "Onc't I might've but not any more. I'd do it to help 'em. I—I'm startin' out today doin' things like that. I've done one thing already this mornin'."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Simons; "launching the new year right, eh? Well, now then, in that case I might be willing to help you—on the quiet, though. I wouldn't want to take any of the credit for myself; it's your notion and you're entitled to all the honor of it. How would you suggest going about it?"

"Well, suh, ef that wire's long enough fur us to

stretch it out across't the ground and stick it through one of the holes in the fence, I thought maybe they'd think it was some kind of a new worm and grab at it, or somethin'."

"The wire is plenty long but I doubt if they'd bite—they're such high-toned chickens that they might not care for worms. But they do do a good deal of drinking. So if you, mind you, on your own responsibility, slipped the wire into the water in that drinking fountain of theirs—you could do that easy enough from this side of the lattice work—and then if I, at this end of the line, just happened to slide the current on a little ways, why, possibly you'd get some results that might be beneficial—to somebody. Anyhow, you might as well go ahead on your own hook and try out the scheme. You yell out when you get the wire laid and I'll turn the switch, kind of accidental-like, and then I'll come on out where you are and we'll wait for results together."

It has been said, and never successfully controverted, either, that virtue is its own reward. It might have been added that, on occasion, the rewards are multiplied and added unto a virtuous practitioner. So it was in this case. For one thing, the smaller of the two spectators who crouched and watched on the near side of the Willingham lattice derived, from what now speedily followed, a wider knowledge of certain phases of natural history. Before his entranced gaze proof was presented to show that among the upper or-

ders of barnyard fowl there are individuals which, while practically identical in appearance, yet vary greatly in temperament and will deport themselves after widely dissimilar fashions when encountering exactly similar conditions.

Take, for a conspicuous example, the first of the crested inmates that approached the charged water fount; the same being a hen, an especially large and dignified chieftainess of a hen. She dipped a ponderous head for refreshment, then, making no sound, rose high in air, assuming as she did so a tomboyish spread-eagle posture and sat down with great violence on the half thawed earth where, for a space measurable by seconds, she remained immobile and fixed, with her neck contorted in a strained, unnatural crook, as though she had swallowed something that would not down.

There was the next hen that felt thirsty. Under the agitation which ensued it suited her nature that she, instantly casting aside all ladylike restraint, should run in swift, distracted rings about the enclosure, picking up speed at each circle and in choked accents proclaiming to her startled sisters that she had been cured of broodiness; that she felt thrilled, exhilarated and—in a word—different. She became a whirling white blur, a sort of feathery comet traveling in a given groove and leaving behind a trail of shrill ejaculations. At least a minute, perhaps a minute and a half, passed before she began to lose headway, and even after she had stopped running she kept jerking herself

to and fro, and when by chance she brushed against a corner of a nesting box she leaped away from it and squawked hoarsely; one might have thought that in her then unsettled and suspicious frame of mind casual contact with any solid object was to be avoided. And so on and so forth.

But it was the overlord of the bailey who, from the standpoint of the experimenters, behaved most satisfactorily. After the fifth member of his train had fallen victim to an apparently frenzied and altogether unaccountable seizure he said to himself—it was quite plain he said it to himself—that this scandalous thing had gone far enough! Mere playfulness was one thing, but outright misconduct was another. While the first riotous paroxysm was at its height the hoyden so far forgot herself as to crash into him, jostling him rudely aside. Indignantly he chased her, being minded to inflict chastisement—and accidentally he set one broad foot squarely in the fountain. With him, the plumage showed the more immediate effects. The buskins on his drumsticks stood stiffly forth, his busby became a fright-wig, his rich growth of neck hackles frizzled straight out and each other separate feather on his person erected itself as he turned somersault after somersault. Eventually becoming somewhat calmer, he went to lean against the farther wall of the enclosure and there fan himself with his wings. He had about him the stunned, stupefied look of a rooster who has been rendered temporarily speechless by a terrific stroke and desires solitude in which to regain his disordered faculties.

His mind soothed itself long before his plumage did. In fact, there seemed reason for doubting that his distraught coat ever again would fit him with its former smoothness.



## Chapter XII

### THE BIRTH OF A NOTION

**M**R. SIMONS straightened himself, pressing one hand to his short ribs and with the other wiping his streaming eyes. Then he stooped again to lift the writhing Juney to his feet. For the time being that young Samaritan must cling to the lattice for support; his exhausted body heaved, and from his tired throat came long-drawn gurgles, sighs, moans. His confrere stroked him on the shoulder.

“There, kid, get quiet—you’re liable to split your sides wide open. Well, I mighty near busted several important blood-vessels of my own. . . . There, that’s better. Well, anyhow, it can’t be denied that you didn’t put renewed life, vim and vigor in these here fancy chickens. If they don’t start in right away laying red, white and blue Easter eggs nobody can say it’s your fault. Of course, they may have had dreams sometimes at night—*hen-mares*, as you might call ’em. And I’m afraid they’ve been permanently cured of drinking water out of a fancy chinawear trough. Looking at ’em now, I get the feeling that they’ll wait until it rains again and then stand round with their heads up

and their bills open and imbibe moisture that way. I'm just trying to put myself in their place; I know that's what I'd do if I was a hen, no matter how thirsty I got in the meantime. But then, you can't expect to apply a brand-new treatment without some small after-effects. Even the doctors admit that. . . .

"I've got to say this, too—your little scheme of touring about, hither and yon, assisting other people's pets to have a Happy New Year, appeals to me, it does so. Looks like to me you've got the makings of a regular professional philanthropist in you. I only wish I could help you along a little further as you go on your way, doing good. I reckon, though, that you don't need much help from me or anybody else. When it comes to thinking up these pleasant little excitements, your mind appears to be pretty tolerable fertile. Still, if you like calling on me any time for a few suggestions, please don't hesitate. Always yours to command—me and this plant, both."

Speaking these last words, Mr. Simons lifted his voice slightly, for his youthful friend was moving off. He was moving off as briskly as a youthful friend might who, every few feet, was bent double by a fit of glad abandon and whose racked frame emitted a constant succession of joyous yelps and bleats and whoops and gasps.

But there was the light of a splendid urge in Juney's rearward look when, having reached the pavement or beyond, he turned and waved a hand in farewell acknowledgment to his late associate.

To a stranger's understanding the absence of any eyebrow on one side might have given a sinister aspect to the face of the departing one, but Mr. Simons clearly divined that a great purpose had kindled its beacons there.

Which indeed was true, as subsequent events would demonstrate.

At twelve-forty p.m. the young person whose movements through this New Year's morn we have been privileged in part to follow, turned into Locust Street, homeward-bound. He would be late for the New Year's dinner; that was sure. The missionary work to which he had devoted the concluding hours of the forenoon had been prolonged beyond all outsetting expectations. There might be a scolding for his tardiness in store; that was probable. He didn't care. He didn't in the least care. Let a harsh world misjudge him; his soul was as a star unsullied.

A sense of the amplitude of his blessings possessed him. His mother had prophesied that from his own conscience he would draw sweet dividends of self-satisfaction did he but pursue a certain course. And how true her words had proven! And how splendid the coinage of his payments! He thought back upon the undoing of Mr. Lem Tyree's bullying cur, stripped, through the agency of these hands, of all those braggadocio airs of his. His mind leaped next to the dramatic events enacted in the newly-arrived Mr. Willingham's poultry close—leaped and tarried for retrospective relishment of the never-to-be-forgotten episodes

which had transpired on that scene. Thence it went on into the future, that facile mind of his, to anticipate and dwell on the rewards which would come—how sure he was that they would come!—as the result of operations on the part of an organization just created, of which he was the founder and of which, undoubtedly, he would be president.

He was in the act of putting his hand on the knob of the front door when he thought of a suitable name for it. He decided that it should be known as the Boys' Going Round Doing Good Club.

## *Chapter XIII*

### HOW THAT NOTION BEGAT FRUIT

**R**EMEMBER, please, it all came about—that which herein is being set forth—in remote days when life infinitely was less complex than the life now being lived. Judge for yourself how remote a day it was: Professional ballplayers still had mustaches, professional prize-fighters still had Irish names, professional stage beauties still had hips, political parties still had principles, and political leaders still had none. You could give people a thrill by riding down the post-office steps on a high wheel bicycle. Balloon ascensions were not exactly novelties but parachute drops comparatively were. A rubber-tired buggy was the last word in vehicular refinement; and it was felt that a civilization which also had provided the telephone, the mustache cup and silver dollars set in the floor of the Palmer House barber shop (Chicago, Ill.) could do little, if anything, more for love of beauty and the progress of mankind on this surfeited planet.

And youth, especially youth of the masculine gender, yet knew the trick of gathering its pleasures from accessories so simple that the generation

next to follow surely would call them by a harder name than simple. For example, Master Eddie Hewlett, better known among intimates as Clabbor Hewlett, experienced a genuine exhilaration on examining the contents of a large and crowded manila envelope sent expressly to him through the U. S. mails and coming from a point almost half-way across the continent, in response to his answer of an alluring advertisement reading as follows:

### JUMBO PRIZE DIME PACKET

Six Songs, words and music; 25 Pictures Pretty Girls; 40 Ways to Make Money; 1 Joke Book; 1 Book on Love; 1 Magic Book; 1 Book Letter Writing; 1 Dream Book and Fortune Teller; 1 Baseball Book, gives rules for games; Deaf and Dumb Alphabet; Language of Flowers; Handkerchief and Parasol Flirtation; 12 Chemical Experiments; Magic Age Table; Great North Pole Game; 100 Conundrums; 3 Puzzles; 12 Games; 30 Verses for Autograph Albums. All the above by mail for 10 cts. and 2 cts. postage. *Boliver Sales Company*, Box 703, Portland, Me.

The requisite outlay, a considerable one by the reckonings of a bygone age, was not undertaken without a deal of weighing of problematical values; but, on inventory, the returns convinced the purchaser that he had received his money's worth. At once he experienced the comfortable feeling which is part of the reward for a wise investment. Noticeably was he satisfied when, as a novitiate of 'the newly-formed Boys' Going Round Doing Good Club, he could offer his associates a suitable march-



ing song for use as they set forth on their first concerted excursion. To Juney Custer must accrue the unaided glories of having conceived the general working plan, of having thought up the name, of having offered the arguments, rounded on his own agreeable reactions to that recent single-handed campaign of his in behalf of dumb brutes, which had brought recruits flocking to his banners. Finally, to Juney, as prime mover, went the present dignities of being president and, in a way, director general of the young organization. But Clabbor Hewlett was not without share in the honors. He had produced the club song.

The affiliates now chanted it, or rather its opening strophes, as they issued from their regular meeting-place up in the Custer stable loft on a certain Saturday morning in the middle of a mild February. It had been chosen in committee of the whole after due appraisal of the merits of all six of the vocal selections comprised within the first budget of the Jumbo Prize Dime Packet. One by one, the other five had been passed on and put aside as uncongenial to the purpose behind the movement. Two of them were cast in a comic mold, three unashamedly were sentimental. By the joint judgment of all concerned, the remaining number seemed better turned than any for the character of the occasion. It had in it a somber note, a strain of seriousness springing from the inherent tragedy of its motif. It was then adopted by acclamation.

To the singers, the air was unfamiliar; that,

however, was but a detail and a technicality. Ignoring the mysterious ciphers of the accompanying score, they memorized the opening verse; and now, moving in mass formation, they chanted these lines to a supporting melody of their own—a tune which had the merit of fitting this lyric or almost any other. The tune may not here be reproduced or even suggested; it might have been the same fabulous one that the old cow died by. But the words ran so:

'Twas the gray of early morning when the dreadful cry  
of "Fire,"

Rang out upon the cold and piercing air;  
Just that little word alone was all it did require  
To spread dismay and panic everywhere.  
Milwaukee was excited as it never was before,  
On learning that the firebells all around  
Were ringing to eternity a hundred souls or more,  
And the Newhall House was burning to the ground!

It is but fair to the reader that briefly he should be advised regarding sundry preparatory steps. This first appearance in force of the banded humanitarians was a thing which had not been launched without due forethought. There had been at least one earlier meeting; this was when the originator described his own late adventures in relation to Mr. Lem Tyree's bombastic dog, Scandal, and a Mr. Willingham's stock of fancy poultry and dwelt upon the agreeable benefits to be gleaned, under the moral head, by administering to the distressed and the downcast in the animal kingdom. It was too early yet, as he pointed out,

to do anything praiseworthy for the insects; anyhow, maybe bugs and things like that didn't count; but surely the realm of domestic beasts and fowls was amply wide, and abounding in opportunities. And when the circus came—and, of course, before summer was past a circus would come, because it always did—why, then, surely fortune could not be so unkind as to deny young faunal scientists who already were skilled in the art of making friends with tame creatures a way to performing yet more spectacular exploits. Here, he was reminded—as public speakers so often are reminded—of a little story:

“F'rinstance, you take elephants. They don't never furgit anythin' you do to 'em. Onc't my father—anyhow, I think it was my father—anyhow, it was somebody or other—he knew a man that went to the circus and he was chewin' on some chewin' tobacco. And the biggest elephunt saw him chewin' and thought it was somethin' nice he was eatin' and stuck out his snout the way an elephunt does when he's beggin' fur candy or peanuts or popcorn or an apple or somethin'. So this here man, he thought he was purty smart and he took and give the elephunt a whole plug of tobacco that he had in his pocket. So the elephunt, he was fooled and went and swallowed it right down, thinkin' it must be a new kind of a fruit-cake or somethin'. But it disagreed with him and, gee, he was a mighty sick elephunt, all right! And the man he like to died laughin' over bein' so smart.

“But you betcher he laughed on the other side

of his mouth before he was through. 'Cause the circus went away and went all round the country and the next year it came back to this same town where that man lived at. And Mr. Smart Aleck, he went to the circus ag'in all dressed up in a new suit of clothes and a new straw hat and ever'thing. And soon as he got inside the tent the elephunt that he'd gave the tobacco to saw him and sucked up a whole barrellful of old dirty water in his snout and waited till the man came closer to him and then spurted all that old dirty water all over him and ruined his clothes fur him. And with that, ever'boday else that was standin' round busted out laughin' and whoopin' fit to kill themselves and that man must 'a' felt mighty cheap. But ef he'd only given that elephunt somethin' good to eat in the first place, the elephunt would 'a' reckernized him just the same way, and prob'ly might 'a' followed him round like a pet dog or give him a ride on his back or somethin'.

"So that's whut all us kids got to be on the look-out to do ourselves. I reckon it wouldn't be great—oh, no, I guess not!—ef one of us made friends that-a-way with a big elephunt this comin' summer and then, summer after next, when the same circus got here ag'in the elephunt was to just bust loose frum the rest of the gang of elephunts and come over to where you was standin' and kneel down in front of you and lift you up on his back and give you a free ride all round the tent! And maybe he'd be so fond of you he wouldn't leave you go 'way frum him, out of his sight, a'tall. And then

like as not the head circus man—the one that owned the circus, I mean—would have to hire you to go 'long with 'em and be friends frum then on with the elephunt that was the one that liked you. I guess that wouldn't be hunkadory!"

"Or maybe, instead of that, the circus people would have to let the elephunt stay right here in this town because I reckon they couldn't make him go away with 'em without he wanted to; and you could keep him in a stable and have him round all the time to do tricks fur you and ride round town on and play with you."

It was Earwigs Erwin who broke in to advance this alternative suggestion, and while he spoke of the dazzling prospect as appertaining to someone designated in the second person, what really this charter member had in mind was a splendid vision in which he himself enacted the star role.

"No," stated Juney firmly, "no, I reckon it'd be better ef you just went on off with the circus; because that-a-way you'd prob'ly git to be the boss of the menag'rie before so very long; and maybe after while you'd own the whole circus, all by yourself. And I guess your parunts couldn't say anythin' about your not goin', either, ef it was to come up the way I'm tellin' you. 'Twouldn't be like you runnin' off to go with a circus and bein' just a clown or a bareback rider or a ringmaster or somethin'—I sh'd say not! But ef the head circus man was to go to your parunts and explain to 'em how he just natchelly had to have you or else lose prob'ly his most expensive elephunt, why

how else could they git out of not lettin' you go! They'd have to let you, that's all. And maybe, years and years after that, when you come back here with your own big circus and rode down Franklin Street on top of the front band-waggin, I reckon your folks wouldn't just be terrible proud of you! And all these here other kids round this town would be standin' on the sidewalk and mighty near die in their tracks, they'd be so jealous. I sh'd say!"

From the charmed circle of his hearers rose a chorus of approbation for a conception so entrancing. Each, mentally, saw himself bowing from the prow of that wallowing front band-wagon in gracious response to the plaudits of an admiring multitude of old acquaintances. But the spell of his own facile eloquence had not swept the orator from his firm moorings. Imagery he had, but a native practicability also was included among his powers. Descending from the clouds, he resumed:

"First, though, we got to make up the 'nitiation part and the ritchul and all that, because this club is goin' to be like a shore-'nuff secrut lodge. And all secrut lodges have ritchuls, because my Uncle Paul, that's a Knights of Pythias, he told me so only here just the other day. And then, after that, we got to decide whut other kids besides us we're goin' to let come in and I guess we won't have plenty of fun 'nitiatin' 'em after they've took off all their clothes and been blindfolded and had their hands tied behind their back, and all like that! But even after they've been 'nitiated they still won't



be reg'lar members, like we already are. First they've got to go and do somethin' nice to a sick cow or a broke-down hoss or somethin', only they mustn't let on about it to other kids because we've got a private patent on this here goin' round doin' good business, and natchelly we don't want any outside kids, that don't belong, to be ketchin' on.

"Then, when they've done this here thing, whut-ever it is, they'll come back and tell us about it and we'll take a vote and frum then on they'll prob'ly be reg'lar, too. But all five of us kids that're here now, we're reg'lars without that. Then some Sad'day mornin' before long we'll start out together and do somethin' big—you know—some-thin' important . . . No, wait, I got a better way than that—I'll decide by myself whut's the first thing we're goin' to do when we start out together; but I reckon I better save that up fur a surprise and not tell anybody beforehand. And now we'd better git busy right away on that ritchul."

## *Chapter XIV*

### YOUNG KNIGHTS MARCH FORTH CRUSADING

**W**HETHER his motives stand forth clear as the noonday sun or remain cloaked in mystery matters not; it is a part of the penalty of being a boy that mankind at large ever misunderstands and misconstrues his public acts. Fate, which in this case merely is another name for fear of ridicule, furthermore decrees that whenever his movements are involved with private causes he shall lack the faculty, or rather the facility, to reveal what has prompted him to these present purposes. Callous though he appears to be, there is a fine underlying sensitiveness in him. And so, offering no apologies he extricates himself as speedily as may be from the situation which threatens personal embarrassment and goes thence, leaving prejudice to do its worst to his reputation. We safely may assume that on the Great Day, when Gabriel's Trump has sounded, much time will be devoted to putting boys right before the eyes of assembled creation.

But ere that last morn redly dawns, boyhood must go on and on enduring outrageous slings and arrows; for the tally of the misjudged, which began

with the offspring of Father Adam, will continue endlessly to grow until mortal time shall be no more. In specific illustration of the point, attention, for the passing moment, is directed to two instances of proof of the universal prevalence of this spirit of adult illiberality.

Firstly, there was Bubber Ferguson. When he climbed the fence of Mrs. Slop Johnson's pig-sty bearing a votive offering of apple peelings and a quick-tempered sow chased him right out again, the elderly owner of the sow stood in the door of her tumble-down cabin fifty yards away and cheered on the enraged animal. You see, she had no way of knowing Bubber Ferguson's present capacity was that of an applicant seeking to qualify for admission to a well-meaning sodality. Besides, Mrs. Slop Johnson was a skeptic touching on the designs, however plausible, of all boys whatsoever; so she called him names fit for meddlers and miscreants as he legged it, and openly voiced her regret that he, and not the sow, had won the race. She almost had her wish, at that; it certainly was a close race.

Secondly, there was Master Claiburne Lanier, an equally zealous candidate for knight-errantry. In pursuance of his ambition he severely was bitten on the forefinger of his right hand by Dr. Lake's Mexican parrot. Yet his intentions hardly could have been finer than they were. Perhaps the parrot in question, which belonged in the first place to the so-called sterner sex, had wearied of forever being called Polly; all parrots must, sooner or later, grow weary of this sort of thing. Perhaps his nature had

been soured by countless disappointing references on the part of strangers to purely suppositious crackers. How would any one of us feel if we were a parrot and people were forever pausing before us to inquire whether we would like a cracker and then failing to produce a cracker, or indeed any dainty, comfit or kickshaw whatsoever?

So, when Master Lanier uttered the conventional greeting and followed it with the customary tiresome question and on top of that made an attempt to scratch the cocked yellow crest, there was a flash of two baleful orange-colored eyes, the clip-clip of a cruel beak, the fluttering of a ruffled green body; and behold, there, too, was a bleeding victim who howled with pain; and bystanders who agreed it served him right for teasing on inoffensive poll-parrot, or anyhow one that was strictly minding its own business until this here devilish little hellion came along and deliberately tried to poke it in the side of the head when the critter wasn't doing a thing on earth to him.

That, in effect, was what these grown-up witnesses said—and of course, for privy reasons, Master Lanier could not explain. What would have been the use of explaining, the world being constituted as it is? In another quarter, though, namely, Juney Custer's stable loft, a haven where the sacred oath of silence might be lifted, his injuries earned for him preferment. It was felt that here was one who actually had suffered for the cause. But that other probationer, Bubber Ferguson, having no

honorable wounds to show, got into the inner fold only by a narrow squeak.

Presumably it rankled in Bubber Ferguson's heart that the squeak had been so narrow; presumably it continued to rankle until the hour of sallying forth in force on the mid-February morning previously alluded to. At any rate, from where he trudged along, a high private of the rear line, he presently interrupted the rendition, for the tenth or twelfth time, of the club song, to ask a question:

"Say, looky here, Juney Custer, when're we goin' start in doin' whutever 'tis you've got figgered out fur us to do?"

"Silence!" commanded Juney. "No fair speakin' till you been spoken to."

"Silence nuthin'!" said the rebel, and said it so sharply that the other crusaders halted, which necessitated that the leader also must halt unless he chose to proceed without any following. "Me, I'm gittin' sick and tired of just walkin' round first one square and then 'nother. This is the third time we've passed by Mister Cartright's corner here and still you ain't showed us any suitable animals fur us to help 'em. Looks like to me you don't know your ownself where we're goin'."

Now, Bubber Ferguson's shaft, fired at random though it was, nevertheless plumped squarely the bull's-eye of Juney Custer's guilty conscience. As a matter of fact, Juney had been so concerned with ritualistic details that time, taking an unfair advantage of him, slipped by until this appointed Saturday came upon him, as it were, unawares.

Lacking a definite schedule for the initial outing, he secretly had counted upon the accident of chance to save him the embarrassment of having to confess that in his brain there was no program; and chance, through nearly an hour of aimless marching and counter-marching utterly had failed him. It was plain, too, that the criticism of this mutineer was taking root in the minds of the rank and file of the expedition. From all sides now doubting looks were being cast upon him; naked skepticism would come next, then open revolt. His captaincy was threatened and Juney knew it. So he did what many another desperate pretender, being similarly beleaguered, has done. He tried to bluster it out.

"I guess I don't have to tell *you* whut we're fixin' to do, Bubber Ferguson," he said defiantly. "I guess all you got to do is just shut up your mouth and not be quite so ficety and wait a little while and see."

"Oh, I do, do I?"

"Yes, you do!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so."

To get the full scope of this phase of the argument and to save space and to confer a favor, the reader is requested to reread the foregoing dialog several times, accenting the lines at each time of reading with an increasing emphasis of sarcasm and contempt. For the words of the prolonged debate did not materially vary—only the derisive inflexions of the debaters did. And it was as so often these disputations are—the principals get nowhere.



"Is that so?" jeered the scoffer once more, then sent his sharpest weapon home to the hilt. "I know whut's the matter with you, Juney Custer. You say you don't have to tell, but that's only because you don't know yourself whut it is."

"I do, too."

"You don't, neither. If you did know you'd 'a' told before now instead of standin' here talkin'. I betcher ef 'twas me runnin' this here club I'd know perzackly where I was goin' and whut I was goin' to do after I got there. But you don't! I got a good notion in my mind right now—a heap better notion than you'd ever think of, even ef you kept on thinkin' a hund'ed years."

Drowning men clutch at straws. Juney clutched at this one.

"Well, ef you're so smart, whut would you do?" he demanded, hiding his eagerness under a fine mask of incredulity.

"I'd go out on Clay Street to the old Enders place and I'd take and let old Mister Jimmy Enders's bony old blind mare—the one that's got a bell on her neck—out of that hoss-lot where he's got her penned up and I'd let her graze on some nice fresh grass in his orchard or somewheres—that's whut I'd do."

The straw had become a life-preserver. Juney mended his grip on it.

"Huh!" he snorted with a finely simulated scorn. "That's the very indential idea I had my ownself all along."

"I bet you you didn't."

"I bet you anything I did. I bet you a thousand dollars I thought it up about Mister Jimmy Enders's old blind mare more'n a week ago. Ef you don't believe me I kin tell you right where I was when I first thought it up about her. I was standin' in our woodshed one evenin' pickin' up kindlin'-wood and all of a sudden——"

"No such of a thing!"

"Say, looky here, Bubber Ferguson, are you gittin' ready to call me a liar right to my face?"

"Well, I ain't skeered to call you one ef I feel like it."

"Well, ef you know whut's good for you you better not feel like it, that's all."

Here peacemakers interposed. It proved their young natures ardently were set upon the main quest that they should interpose at all, for ordinarily so promising a quarrel as this one was, with the pleasurable prospect of actual hostilities, would have found favor in their sight. Clabbor Hewlett summed up the common verdict.

"Well, whut diffe'nce does it make who thought it up first? Lettin' an old blind mare out of a lot don't sound so very excitin' to me, but we might as well go ahead and do it, without you-all want to stay here jawin' all day and prob'ly bust up the club the very first time we've got all the members together. Anyhow, we've got a mighty good song to sing, that I furnished; nobody can't contradict that, I reckon. Come on, you fellers, let's start at the beginnin' ag'in and yell her out good and loud."

## Chapter XV

### A GENTLEMAN IS IN A HOLE

WITH unabated fervor they still were yelling her out good and loud as they debouched from the straightaway lines of Clay Street. Their feet sludged in the soft undergoing while they swung slantwise across the old Enders orchard toward that trampled enclosure behind the old Enders homestead, which by courtesy wore the name of pasture. They had passed beneath the front lines of gnarled and leafless apple boughs when a spectacle of minor import brought both song and flank movement to temporary suspension.

Well back among the ancient trees was stacked much planking fragrant of piney woods; likewise a small heap of new brick, and such lesser supplies as bundled shingles and what the sawmillers spoke of as sash, door and trim stuff. Evidently somebody aimed to erect a domicile here; in fact, to judge from certain signs, operations must already be under way. Slightly to the rear of where the builders' stocks were bestowed, a ring of fresh moist clods reared, like a low wall, on the wet grass; this parapet—if we may call it that—being crowned with a windlass arrangement which canted over at

a crippled angle and was entangled in a snarl of muddied ropes and muddied wooden buckets.

No sooner has there risen the framework of any structure intended for human occupancy, than a woman—which means every normal woman—has the yearning to explore it and mentally to rearrange its interior economies in accordance with her personal views as to the patterns which a proper house should follow; but a boy's interest in the proceeding dates from the moment when the material reaches the site and before ever soil has been broken for the foundations. So the troubadouring band now on the spot postponed, for the moment, the carrying out of their real errand in coming hither and deployed to inspect the lumber piles and all, speculating among themselves as to why there should be no workmen present when so much equipment was ready for their hands. Their president passed on alone, his curiosity having been briskened by that puzzling circle of new earth just beyond. He came up to it and balanced himself on the sticky clay ridge and looked below into a rounded hole perhaps fifteen feet in depth and, roughly, seven feet in diameter. From the bottom of the bore a face stared up into his, a face which he recognized, for all that it was heavily painted with a smearing of yellow mud and wore an expression of the most intense exasperation.

"Hello, Mister Calloway, whut you doin' there?" hailed Juney, but go no farther.

"Git away from here, you little rapskillion!" bel-  
lowed the entombed gentleman, as though even so

innocent a question had snapped a patience already taxed beyond powers of mortal control. "Git on away before I go plum crazy." He waved a spade aloft and reenforced the order with an upward-pouring stream of such words as Juney's ears were supposed never to hear—fascinating words but parentally forbidden. Often enough he had been instructed to betake himself out of any vicinity in which these words were being used; but it was more Mr. Calloway's violent manner of speech than the language which he employed that caused the young hearer immediately to back off from the verge of the excavation. As he retreated, Mr. Calloway's rasping outbursts pursued him.

"Ain't it enough"—Mr. Calloway plainly was addressing himself, and did we undertake to quote him fully it would be necessary here to insert many blanks, not to mention quite a few of the tripled or quadrupled blankety-blanks—"ain't it enough fur that there chuckle-headed helper of mine to have to go and bust up the h'istin' apparatus and then have to go away mebbe half a mile to git a hammer and nails to mend it with, and leave me penned up down here in this here cistern and all gaumed up to my eyebrows in muck and mire and—and muck, without no way to git out till the derved idiot gits back ag'in, which Gawd only knows how long that'll be—ain't that enough, without some infernal little upstart comin' to ast me whut I'm doin' down here?" His geysering voice rose to a spiteful shriek. "Whut does he think I'm doin' down here, drowndin' by inches in this here seepwater and freezin' in

this here cold mud—enjoyin' myself, mebbe? Whut the——!” But the rest, at least for publication purposes, must be silence.

Leaving the captive Mr. Calloway to his profane devices, we return with Juney to where he rejoined his underlings. “ ’Tain’t nobody but that there old Mister Enoch Calloway that cleans out wells and—and things—and gits drunk ever’ Sad’day night and cusses so much,” he explained; “and seems like we better not go monkeyin’ round too clos’t to him, any of us, because he’s actin’ like he was kind of urritated about somethin’. Anyhow, we got somethin’ better to do.” He took on the authoritative port. “Forwud march!”



## Chapter XVI

### ENTERTAINMENT FOR MAN AND BEAST

A BLIND mare, one that has been afflicted with blindness for a long time and has become an established local institution, gets used to things. This white blind mare of Mr. Jimmy Enders was used, no doubt, to wearing on her neck a clamorous bell even though, being confined as she was within a closed area, there appeared to be no valid reason why she should wear it. Probably in the afflicted state of her latter years she yet carried this clanking ornamentation because she had done so in happier days before her eyes failed her and she served as file-leader for a train of pack-mules out at the long since abandoned Massac spar mines. Many a legal precedent is based on no better reason than this, as your family lawyer, in confidence, may tell you. And an honored tradition is frequently no more than a transmitted habit.

Be that as it may, and is, this particular tradition was accustomed to take whatever might befall her, and so made no objection when young hands laid hold on her shaggy forelock and strange young voices addressed her soothingly and light pressure against her flanks began to guide her along a given course. She plodded unresistingly through a gap

where the snagged fence had been torn away for her passage and then, losing her chaperonage and feeling deep grass under her venerable feet she gave a snort of content and fell to nibbling at the juicy sustenance which the will of Providence, by these unseen forces, had provided. As is the way of horse-flesh the world over, she would take a stride and a bite, a stride and a bite, lifting her head between to mouth the morsels and, in her case, causing the pendant bell to clink loudly. All at once, as denoting gratification, she neighed loudly. That happened after she had advanced perhaps a dozen rods into this new pasturage that was so agreeably different from her recent ranging ground with its scantier herbage. At this moment, though, she bumped against a tree bole and the neigh changed to a loud, offended snort; simultaneously the bell clapper gave a great *clang-a-lang*.

From a point entirely out of view but within easy earshot of the clubmen came, soaring forth now and instantly, a quite different sound. It was the sound of a human voice. Plainly, its source was subterranean. It was a loud voice, hoarse, startled, you might even say alarmed. It was saying:

"Whoa! Whoa! *Whoa!*"

Like that, over and over again.

Obedient to the distant dictation of words familiar in her manual of understanding, the white mare halted, facing toward the direction whence the orders came. *Tinkle-tinkle* went the diminished note of her throat jewel.

"That's right—whoa, and stay whoaed," objured the voice; then continued in a perturbed soliloquy: "Whut *expurgated* idiot has done gone and let that *elided* old nag out of that *excerpted* hoss-lot back yonder? Or if no *eliminated* somebody let her loose, how in the *stricken-out* name of *Something-or-other* did she git loose? And her blunderin' round here now, blind as a *censored* bat—*consign* her *amply-described* picture to a *naughtily-mentioned* Place! And me all jammed up in this here *stoutly adjectived* hole in the ground, like an *exclamation-pointed* rabbit in a *prologued* rabbit-gum, without no way to climb out till that *extensively-designated* fool of a *forcibly-qualified* helper of mine comes back! And her liable to come tumblin' in on me any *hyphenated*, *thrice-compounded*, *sublimated* minute—*blank-space* her to the hottest corner of *dash* and repeat the *dash ad libitum* and *ad infinitum*! Whoa, you, and keep on whoain'!"

Across the faces of the members of the Going Round Doing Good Club, like wavelets on the surfaces of so many small ponds or puddles, varying expressions had swiftly been rippling during this—first amazement, then perplexity, then comprehension, then admiration for the invisible declaimer's flow of expletives, and intermingled with these successive casts, and, as it were, overlapping them, a dawning appreciation which grew and grew as the monologue was extended and gathered vigor and sincerity unto itself. In another breath their gigglings would have blended into an unrestrained joint whoop of gladness—but Juney Custer had

sprung before them, with his fingers to his lips in token of silence. Genius works best when it works fastest.

He held them to a difficult repression while, quickly and in low tones, he outlined what he had in mind. At his first sentence his meaning was made manifest and willing aides sprang forward to help him as he fumbled to undo the buckle of the stiff leather strap which encircled the mare's stretched neck. Two more steered that patient beast about, returning her to her regular bidding-place, then threw up the bars of the fence behind her and ran at top speed back to join the rest, who already had fallen into a stealthy procession behind the arch-plotter.

Their chief, they quickly saw, was not the one to anticipate a climax by undue precipitancy. Bearing the bell in his hands and shaking it so that it rang gently but constantly, he was describing a wide circumference but making the partly-dug cistern the axis for his circle. He completed the first wheel, then swung toward its hub, still trailed by his fellow conspirators, they clinging one to another for support and some with their hands thrust between their jaws to still the convulsive sounds which would have betrayed them. And all the while, steadily, jerkily, the bell gave off its music. And—need one add it?—all the while, too, there arose from the pit which they were nearing a broken and yet an unbroken torrent of entreaties, commands, denunciations, which, with the stronger phraseology

merely implied since it may not be repeated, ran something thus:

“Whoa! Back! Back up! Whoa—whoa, I tell you! Git away! Git plum away frum there! Oh, (*irrelevant interpolation*) oh, she’s comin’ closer! Whoa! She’ll be right a’top me ’nother minute! Back up! Git up! Whoa! Help! Help! Oh, Lawd have mercy! Murder! Police! Whoa!”

Old Faithful, away out yonder in Yellowstone Park, might with cause have been envious.

Right on up within ten feet of the mouth of the hole advanced Juney Custer and his friends. Suddenly it was impressed upon him, upon them as well, that while Mr. Calloway still pleaded for deliverance he now, in his final juncture, had divided his petition, addressing fragments of it to Mr. Enders’ blind mare and portions to other mundane quarters, but intermittently blended in with these were appeals to a higher power. Coincidentally, and for the first time in their young lives, they realized that, differently arranged, some of the very same words which swearing persons use may appropriately figure in prayer, so that irreverence becomes reverence and impiety is translated into a most sincere devoutness. It had not occurred to them before; afterwards they were to marvel at it. And also on that subsequent date they were to agree that for a person who must have been sadly out of practise, Mr. Calloway had prayed mighty well—rustily in spots, perhaps, yet on the whole with range and volume.

But this was no time for marveling nor for

matching compliments, either. This was a time only for happiness such as but too rarely comes to bubbling youth.

Something else in the nature of an inspiration occurred within the master brain among them. With its owner, on this great day, to think was to execute. By long odds it was his neatest stroke; the high-water mark of a praiseful talent. For with one loud discordant rattling of his bell, he kicked the earth so that bits of gravel and loose clods of clay arose before his toe and descended spatteringly into the orifice and, at the same time, he produced a creditable imitation of a mare's nickering.

Mr. Calloway had done one thing already on this morning which he had not done for years—as a repentant sinner sorely circumstanced and with his shortcomings heavy upon him, he had invoked supernal aid. Now he was to do another which never in all his days had he done before, and that was to faint dead away. His conscious utterances ended with a last faint *whoa* where the *Amen* should have been.

Silence, arising from whence lately so much of tumultuous sound had issued, checked the group above him. Oddly disturbed and governed by a common impulse, they gave back a few feet, leaving their leader alone there on the edge of the earthen ring. He took a furtive step or two forward and looked down into the excavation. Then, still treading lightly, he likewise withdrew from that spot.



With care he laid the bell in the grass and in an uneasy half-whisper addressed his followers:

"Seems like he must 'a' got all worn out frum hollowin' so loud." An after-thought came. "He may 'a' been tired frum tryin' to climb out of there, too—the sides of that old hole are all tore up like as ef he'd been gougin' with his fingers. So he's went to sleep, I reckon. He's sort of layin' up ag'inst the bottom with his eyes shut and kind of mumblin' to himself." He glanced about him into the empty landscape dubiously. "I guess maybe we'd better all be goin' on away frum here."

With the gravity of helpers to the high priest leaving the temple, they departed. This Levitical mien endured until they had traveled two hundred yards or more. But then, when solemnity had fallen from them as a discarded garment, when they really began to laugh and abandoned themselves to it, why, they caught up with their laughing in no time at all.

Afternoon was well advanced before Mr. Enoch Calloway felt equal to starting for home. So doing, he automatically followed a somewhat roundabout course. For professional reasons he customarily went through alleys and byways in preference to traversing broader avenues; the same had become a fixed idiosyncrasy. It was in back yards that he pursued the allied branches of his calling. Naturally, in his present state, all unstrung and distraught as he was, he obeyed the call of habit.

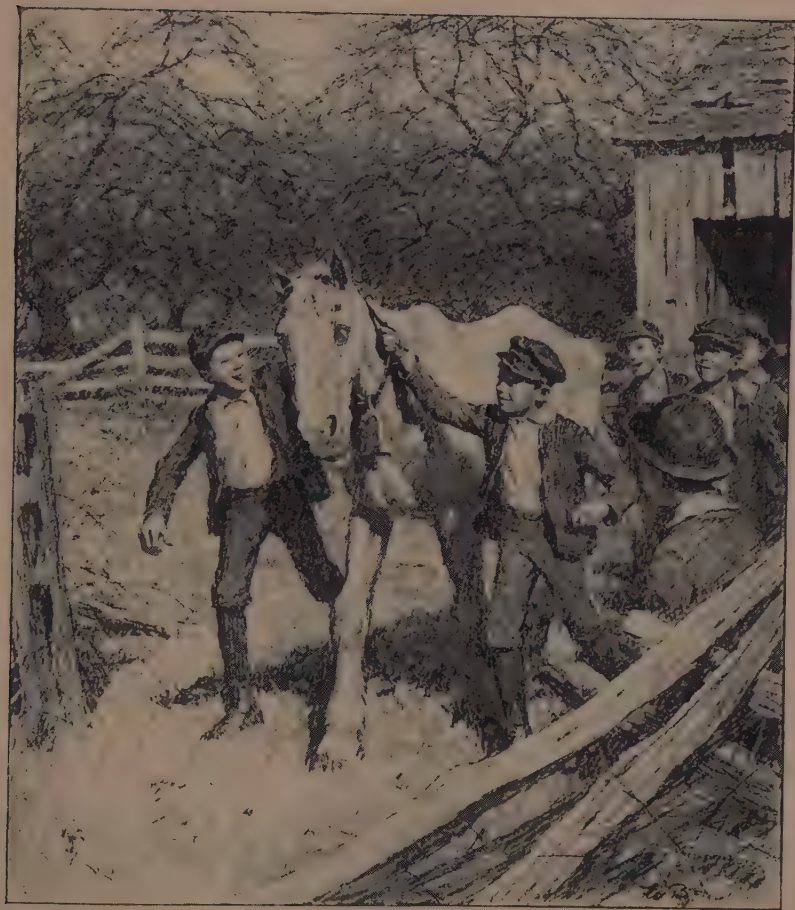
He was midway of a certain alley when from the

loft window of a stable at his left he caught the sound of singing. Pricked by the quick spur of reminiscence, he flinched, then came to a standstill. He harkened attentively. Words came floating down to him—words of a lugubrious purport and delivered to a refrain of peculiar depression but now invested with an uplifting tone which exalted them as though, by some magic in the rendition, a versed dirge had been changed into a pæan of thanksgiving:

'Twas the gra-hay of early ma-horning when the der-  
edful cry of "Fire"  
Rang out upon the ca-hold and piercing air!

The listener was not concerned with the accomplished transformation in what, to begin with, must have been intended for a serious composition, nor did the lingering cadences have for him any noticeable appeal. He was engaged, with the help of his mind, in putting two and two together. When most mathematicians do this they get four. But Mr. Calloway was not achieving a result so humdrum. He was getting madder. He had been mad to start with. In another half-minute he would be in a state of madness only to be indicated by the insertion of the strongest possible superlatives.

For he was reminding himself of interwoven circumstances; was piecing this and that together. The absence of any tracks save small human tracks in the soft footing about his recent place of confinement, the finding of the blind mare's bell where it had been dropped on the turf, the evidence of re-



SHE PLODDED UNRESISTINGLY THROUGH A GAP  
WHERE THE SNAGGLED FENCE HAD BEEN TORN  
AWAY.



placed fencerails—these suspicious clues were observed by him after he had revived out of his swooning and had been rescued and had so sufficiently recovered from effects as to be able to seek for causes. And now a painful chord of familiar memory was being played upon. It seemed to him—indeed, he was quite sure of it—that shortly before that dreadful thing which had happened began to happen, he heard from a near-by point these same measures that now he heard.

But he would wait a little tiny while to be convinced fully. It would cost nothing to wait. As Robert Burns so aptly remarked, wrath warms with nursing.

The stanza approached its poignant culmination. It came in an outpouring of mingled young voices, all striving to put special joyousness into the apogee:

—were ringing to eternite-e-e a hundred souls or more  
 And the Newhall House was ber-hurning to the ger-  
 ound-d-d!"

It was sufficient. The furious Mr. Calloway gave an involuntary berserker howl as he burst through an alley gate and lumbered to the inner side of the stable and dove in at the entrance door, which admitted to the ladder leading up to the haymow. He took the rungs three at a lunge. Even so, he moved too slowly. His bellow of rage had been a warning; his feet on the ladder had further betrayed him.

A trap-door in the floor above was slammed down, giving him a severe knock on his head. A bar was thrust through the bolt-holes, and as Mr. Calloway clung there to the ladder, dazed and with his vengeance all unfed, eight lithe little young forms slid fleetly through a feeding hole at the far end of the loft, descended into a manger below and whisking out through a rear doorway of the cow-shed, scaled a neighbor's fence on the opposite side of the alley and were gone.

The Boys' Going Round Doing Good Club had adjourned *sine die*. Indeed, if the truth had been known by its scattering members, it had permanently disbanded, never again to be reunited. For, though times have changed since that long-begone age, and manners and morals too, boy nature, which is a model in its way for all of human nature, remains unaltered; so that a thing which today is alluring tomorrow becomes commonplace and is abandoned for some newer and more promising fancy.



## *Chapter XVII*

### LEAVING THE CUSTER FAMILY FLAT

**N**OW, now, now, just wait a minute, you-all, and hear what I've got to say. We'll settle this thing right now."

Mr. Custer was speaking in the bosom, as the saying goes, of the family. You hardly could have called it a domestic circle, though. It was too cater-cornered for that; too pyramidic in its design. A circle suggests harmony and concord. It suggests forces swinging in dimensional unison, whereas, to imply the geometrics of this conference, we should require lines meeting at acutely opposite angles.

He was speaking in a voice which brought attention from precisely one-half of his audience. The unruly mumble at his left was hushed and he who had been mumbling screwed his form in foreboding. For when Mr. Custer spoke thus it was as though the sheets of a doomsday book had been unscrolled, as though accuser, prosecutor, judge, jurors—yes, and executioner—all had been merged together in a single shape to give verdict by the one common utterance in a decree from which there was no appeal. As Mrs. Custer often said: "When

he begins to talk that way he means every word of it and there's no earthly use your saying anything back to him, because it just simply won't do you one single bit of good."

Nevertheless, she felt that her position, being somewhat on the defensive side, needed fortifying. She would apply the brakes to her tongue by degrees. Rather plaintively and protestingly she was trailing off with a: "Gracious knows I always try to do a good part by my children. If once in a while I make mistakes, why, everybody makes mis——"

But here, in mid-speech, her husband rudely rode her down:

"Yes, Helena, you've already gone into that—extensively. Nobody's quarreling with your good intentions; at least I'm not. Anyhow, that part of it doesn't matter. Here's the situation as regards this boy here." He checked off the indictment point by point on his fingers. "I get complaints of him again today from one of the neighbors—sheer vandalism this time, not just ordinary cutting-up. On top of that it seems that for the third time inside of less than six months he and some of these other young ruffians he runs with have been picking on the Reverend Mr. Hemingway's boy; not that I care very deeply for Parson Hemingway or his boy either from what I've seen of them, but I've warned him at least twice before to leave that mealy-mouthed youngster strictly alone. It's bad enough to have that mischief-making father of his waylaying me on the street to tell me his

boy can't show his nose outdoors without my boy and Hank Erwin's middle boy and Eli Ferguson's boy and I don't know who-all else's boy chasing him back in again. I suppose somebody thinks I want to have a preacher blasting at me and mine from the pulpit? Well, I don't!

"Then, to finish off with, his teacher writes a note to you this evening that he's absolutely unmanageable in school—getting to be a bad example for his whole class and all that sort of thing. So when I get home tonight all tired out after a hard day and hear that, coming right on the heels of everything else, it seems to me there's only one thing left to do and that's to escort the young gentleman out to the wood-shed and give him a first-class hiding. But no, Helena, you won't have it that way. You set up the argument that he's getting too old and too big to be whipped—that we ought to wait until after supper and call him in here and try the effect of moral persuasion. So, against my own reason, I give in.

"My own judgment tells me that as long as a boy is small enough not to know better than just to run wild and make a common nuisance of himself around town, he's still about the right size to be appealed to with a paddle. Just apply the medicine with a willing hand to his young backsides and let it soak into him from that direction—that's my notion. But you talk me out of it and finally I say, all right, go ahead and let's try your scheme.

"And what's the result? That's what I'm asking you—what's the result? He starts riding the high

horse—that's the answer. Just sits here with his under jaw poked out a foot and grumbles. Nobody appreciates him and nobody sympathizes with him and somebody is forever scolding him or correcting him or punishing him and so he's got a great mind to run away from home and never come back any more. I've heard him growling that same threat before now, behind my back, and so have you, I reckon; but now, by doctors, he's got the gall to say it right to our faces—because he knows I've already told him that this was one time, anyway, when he wasn't going to get a thrashing and he's taking advantage of it. I wonder what's got into the boy lately? It must be the Old Harry himself."

The accuser glared at the accused, whose sulky eye avoided his. The trouble with Mr. Custer was that he lived too much an indoor life; the still greater trouble with him was that for so many eons his forbears had been sleeping under roofs instead of under trees. A cave-dwelling ancestor ten thousand years back might have sensed a thing which to his father was unsolvable. The caveman, one guesses, would have known well enough that when the spring of the year comes the younger ones all feel its call. The cubs and the kittens, the colts and the calves—they feel the call of it, each weanling among them, and they behave accordingly. He could have told Mr. Custer exactly what had got into the boy. He could have told him that it was nature, which is youth, which is puppyhood kicking up its heels, which, by interpre-

tation, is springtime, which sometimes, by the blinded judgments of a penned-up and housed-in mankind, is the Old Harry aforesaid. But the ancients called it Pan piping in the woods.

Lacking the diagnostic wisdom of a Stone Age parent, Mr. Custer merely continued to glower, seeking to stare down the embered defiance which he could read in the evading gaze of the culprit. But it is very hard to put a person out of countenance when that person simply refuses to look at you at all.

"So much for that," said Mr. Custer, and brought his summing-up to a close. "I've said I wouldn't put the weight of my hand on him and I keep my word. But he's got to keep his word, too. Just now he threatened to leave home. Very well then, let him leave it, since he's been so ill-used here by a couple of people who don't understand him." For the first time since taking over the burden of the review Mr. Custer addressed his son direct: "You meant it, didn't you, what you said no longer than five minutes ago about running away?"

"Yes, suh, I did." Determination—or some other emotion—made swollen the huddled form. The averted face was positively varicose.

"Well then, you'd better go. But there's no need for you to run away. If you ran off that might cause it to appear that we two didn't want you to leave, whereas the truth of the matter is we wouldn't have you stay any longer in a house where you're so put upon and so miserable and all. We wouldn't have you here at any price—

not under those conditions. So before you go to bed you just lay out the clothes you want to wear and the things you want to take with you and tomorrow morning I'll see you off. There's no ill-feeling, understand that; you're leaving of your own free will and with our full approval and consent. I'm even going to hand you a little money to help you on your way. Of course there's no question you'll make a success out in the world. Still, at the beginning a small amount of cash may come in handy; you never can tell in advance about those things. And if, after years and years from now you should happen to come back by this way and we should happen still to be alive—your mother and I—why, we'll both be very glad to see you here. Just drop in on us any time you're passing through and——”

“I ain't never comin' back,” declared the offender. He groped for words to give an added pressure of emphasis to his ultimatum. “Not—not never a-tall!”

“Well, now, that's the proper spirit,” said Mr. Custer heartily. “No doubt you'll be making friends away from here who'll appreciate you in a way that we never have and naturally you'd feel more at home among them. Probably you'll not miss us and we'll try not not to miss you. The house will be quiet, of course—but then, on the other hand, it will be peaceful. And while you might not think it, your mother and I are both great lovers of peace—maybe because we've had so little of it this last year or so while you were



growing up. Well, I suggest you'd better be getting off to bed. Pulling out so early in the morning, you'll need to get a good long rest on the last night you ever expect to spend in this house."

With the manner of one who dismisses from his thoughts a trifling matter which effectually had been disposed of, Mr. Custer brought from an inner pocket a sheaf of papers and envelopes and began sifting through them. He glanced up once; it was to daunt his wife with a hard look. That happened just as his son had reached the threshold on his way out and Mrs. Custer, half rising from her chair, had made as though to speak. The brow-beaten woman sank back again, so that the boy was witness to no part of the by-play.

Through the door, after he slammed it behind him, he heard his father speaking in quite commonplace tones to his mother and, although the note was muffled, he detected the casual, matter-of-fact murmur of her reply. He stamped his departing feet down very hard on the floor of the hallway as though to stifle sounds to him utterly distasteful.

He had been asleep two hours when the door of his room was softly opened and Mrs. Custer came tiptoeing in and lighted the gas. She was practicing self-deceit. She was pretending her sole design was to make sure that not too much night air was getting in at the window. For night air was a dreaded and a dreadful thing; it was blamed for as many ills, almost, as your teeth and your tonsils now are being blamed for.

It is only on the stage—where it invariably occurs—that a person on entering will walk all around and almost over large conspicuous objects or actors who lie about in plain view, sometimes actually cluttering up the scene, before with a great start of surprise discovering their inanimate presence. Immediately this lady was aware of what of special interest the chamber contained. Draped over a chair alongside the bed and evincing a tidiness of bestowal which she never recalled having observed before in any of her son's belongings, was his second-best suit; and on the floor near it, grouped with such purely utilitarian neighbors as a pair of shoes, a pair of stockings and a cap, she beheld a neat heap of articles made up, by her quick invoice, of the following items:

A double-bladed Barlow knife, new.

A twenty-two caliber nickel-plated revolver, old, and with the cylinder missing.

A collection of tin tobacco tags affixed to a pine board.

An iron savings bank believed by her to contain upwards of three dollars.

Another pair of stockings.

Two handkerchiefs.

A fishing line with a cork "bobber," several spare hooks and extra leads in a small glass vial labeled *Spts Turps*.

A book by the late Mayne Reid.

A book by Nate Salisbury dealing with the life and achievements of Col. W. F. Cody ("Buffalo Bill").

A cigar box, contents unknown, the lid being made fast with a heavy twine string.

## LEAVING THE CUSTER FAMILY FLAT

A small mysterious bundle in paper, also compactly bound.

A mouth-organ or harmonica in an indifferent state of repair.

A large star-shaped badge of German silver inscribed *Private Detective*.

Three flint arrow-heads.

And, to conclude with, a supplemental shirt-waist, presumably included with his luggage as an afterthought on the part of the prospective traveler.

As for the warder of these properties, he was lying on his back with an arm flung across his eyes, hiding the upper part of his face. The mouth in slumber was puffed still in a mutinous pout but as she bent over him, making little choked whimpering sounds down in her throat, she saw his under lip quiver.

There is no telling what next she might have done—her arms were opened as though to embrace him and she had whispered twice the inappropriate words, "My poor child"—when at this moment the voice of her husband called out to her from the room adjoining. She gave a guilty start and then, restored to a reluctant sense of her duty, moved back a pace. She hesitated there rebelliously; and he called again more insistently. So she turned out the light and went to him. But before she went she returned to the bedside and one of her hands, fluttering in the dark, swiftly caressed a corner of the crumpled pillow beneath the round head and she patted gently, her fingers lingering for just a breath, that asterisk of sandy reddish

hair at the peak of the skull which was one of Juney's signs of distinguishment when his hat was off. Those times, they called them "cow-licks" and girls who had them hated them, but boys similarly marked didn't seem to mind it much, if at all. As her touch grazed his spraying scalplock, the sleeper stirred fretfully. With that she flew away and a moment later was asking Mr. Custer in a tense tone whether he wanted to rouse everybody in the house—whooping and carrying on that way?

But marital intimidation may be carried just so far and no farther. That following morning, in prolonged obedience to a dominating will, she stood at an upper front window hidden behind the curtains and from this place watched while a small figure, slightly burdened with two smallish parcels, walked with what evidently was intended for a care-free swagger down the walk to the gate and out at the gate and up the street to the corner and around the corner. With her fists clenched to her breasts and her wet eyelids blinking she watched that figure go, and when, just before it passed out of her view, it slowed and turned for a long-drawn rearward look, something inside of her gave way all at once. She ran to the head of the stairs and poured her disconsolate words down below in a quavering wail:

"John C. Calhoun Custer, I never suspected—I never dreamed until this minute—that you could be so deliberately, so absolutely hard-hearted! Why, you actually went and did it! I never thought you could do it! I thought all along that

at the last minute you'd surely have a little humanity. You let him go. And—and—and now he's gone!"

"Yep," he answered back callously, "I let him go. In fact, you might venture so far as to say that I almost urged him to go. And now he's gone, just as you were saying."

"Oh—oh, what happened before that?"

"Well, for one thing, we had breakfast together, just the two of us. I explained to him that for obvious reasons you preferred not to come down to see him off but that you sent him a good-bye through me along with your very best wishes and that——"

"My best wish-h-e-e-s!" The wail was threatening to become a bleat.

"And that I didn't wish to wake up his two little sisters but that if he had any farewell messages for them I'd be very glad to see that they were delivered."

"Farewell mess-a-g-e-s!" It had become a bleat. Anyone who ever heard a bleat would have recognized it as one.

"Yes, quite so. Relations were somewhat strained during the meal. He didn't seem to have his regular appetite with him. We had hot waffles, too."

"And you—you practically drove my poor child out of your house on an empty stomach!"

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say an empty stomach! A stomach not quite as tightly packed as usual—that would describe it better. Oh yes, and I slipped him a five-dollar bill, and just as he

was leaving I remembered something else and called him back and wrote him out a note to take along with him. One of those To-whom-it-may-concern things, you know, saying that the bearer was quitting this establishment with the approval of his legal guardians and that from now on he would be the master of his own movements. And then I added a line that if anybody wished to employ a boy about his size I could cheerfully recommend him as being a boy about his size. Or words to that effect. And signed it and handed it over to him. That was about all, I believe. We shook hands."

"You s-s-shook h-hands! You mean to tell me that all you did was to shake h-h-and's?"

"*Um huh.* Oh, everything was very friendly between us—forced, perhaps, but on the whole, friendly."

"Oh, you—you—you! John Custer, suppose he never came back! I guess you'd be sorry then. No, you wouldn't, either—you're too cruel to care."

"Oh, I hardly think he'll be gone forever! I'm expecting him in much sooner than that. And now, please hush crying, Helena, and come on down here like a sensible woman—I've got a few plans in my head that I want to outline to you, because you're going to help me carry them out."

"Oh, John, is there something else? I warn you now I can't endure much more."

"Oh yes you can, I reckon, if you try hard enough! Say, maybe you think I'm enjoying this my ownself? Maybe you think I don't realize how



close I came to giving myself away to him when he walked out of this front door here? My Lord, woman, what do you suppose I'm made of—stone?"

"Well, you certainly act like it." Her temper was cracking. "No more feeling than a—a—I don't know what. I'm coming down and I'm going to listen to you until you're through—and then I'm going to give you a piece of my mind that I'm bound you won't forget in a hurry. . . . Just almost, as you might say, a baby!" This last was delivered in an incoherent burst as she descended the stairs.

Having rounded the corner, the traveler presently checked his swinging stride and, falling into a preoccupied trudge, took inventory of his private emotions, which were various. Many and many a time he had pictured the very thing which now was coming to pass. In ireful seclusion, all tingling and sore from disciplinary measures, he had sat and made it to march before him in a mental panorama.

To be sure, the successive phases of that vision differed widely from the actual development. For this, the fact of it, had come upon him, it seemed to him, with a great and rushing swiftiness, while the other had been a blending of related episodes grouping themselves in an order almost leisurely—first, the secret departure from environs grown intolerably hateful; the abandon of woe among those left behind on their discovery that the victim of injustice was gone—utterly gone and for good

and all; the remorse when it was too late to make amends for their ill-doings; the patient waiting through the long, long months for his return; the tears when thrice daily they must face his empty chair at the table; the saddened evenings by a desolate fireside as they spoke of his virtues; and meanwhile, for the object of these sorrowful repinings, the casting-off of shackles, the free, sweet air of liberty, the splendid independence, and ever and always the open road before him, a road having no school-houses on it whatsoever, but with romance lurking past each turn for one who came with dauntless front; moreover a road ever and always running westward and farther westward to the plains where the redskins were, and the snow-topped mountains where adventure was.

By heart he knew the formula for the great outcome. In a remote mining camp hardy souls, bluff of speech but with hearts of gold, welcomed the slender stripling who appeared one day among them, learning soon to revere him for his skill at markmanship, his matchless courage, his abilities as a trailer. So they dubbed him Little Sure Shot, the Boy Scout, and hailing him as their leader, gladly they followed him as he rode to the lairs of trapped bandits or along the track of painted war parties fleeing with his dread name on their lips.

After years and years came his return to the scenes of his infancy. There was the reception on his arrival with school children singing in the streets, for, in honor of the event, a public holiday had been declared. There was the triumphant

drive up from the depot in a hack with the top thrown up and white horses to draw it, Dean's band going on ahead and the mayor and common council riding behind, also in open hacks but with no white horses. Then the reunion, at the portal of the old home, with those whose mistreatment so long before had sent him forth, and their pride in him and his generous forgiveness for all of embitterment they had wrought in the past; and finally his promise some day to come again to visit them and tell them of his life as an Indian fighter. But now he might tarry for but a few hours. To Washington, D. C., he must hurry, there to receive the official thanks of a grateful government, then hasten back again to the wilds. For his ancient enemy, Bloody Hand, chief of the Cheyennes, had escaped from captivity and among the scattered settlements fresh deviltry was afoot!

Such had been the picture; but about the achieved reality there were some more or less discomforting details. To begin with, nowhere among the authorities which he had read—clandestinely and against the household edicts—was any mention made of a hard lump rising in the throat of the young wayfarer. Nothing whatever had been said about any hard lumps. And in the printed word the transition from civilized haunts to the highest peaks of the Rockies had been skipped over, as it were, in a breath. The ending of Chapter I saw the future Little Sure Shot stealing away from the clutches of his cruel taskmasters. The beginning of Chapter II met him entering the rude frontier

hamlet of Red Gulch. Yet a less congenial work, in the nature of a text-book, offered evidence that the real Wild West lay away off yonder somewhere, or more specifically, far over on the right-hand side of the page, even past St. Louis, Missouri. And St. Louis was but a dot in a distant part which was tinted blue, with a chocolate-colored oblong and part of a maroon strip intervening between it and these present whereabouts. Geography would have to be reckoned with.

Also there was this: In the historical versions the urchin who fled always went by stealth, pitting his wits against those who would have detained him. He went picturesquely, as a hunted fugitive. But here all the agreeable drama of running away had been ground to bits by a cold-blooded mechanism. Out of the reverie through which he moved, Custer *filis* plucked forth the conviction that an inhuman assemblage of cogs and wheels suddenly had been marshaled and invoked against him, thrusting him out almost by main force. A condemned man dreaming of reprieve or pardon and awakening to hear the sheriff testing the trap beyond his cell window might well suffer from a similar dazed confusion of ideas.

Maybe it was the shocking abruptness of the whole transaction up to this point, the feeling of having been swept off one's feet and rushed headlong, willy-nilly, into an undertaking requiring thought and calculation, which was responsible for that curious lumpiness in the throat. And maybe it was because he must speak through it that the

ousted one, now addressing himself, rendered his words with a certain huskiness:

"All righty fur them," he said. "I guess they'll find out. I guess they'll be laughin' on the other side of their mouths four or five months frum now."

He put down one of his bundles to thrust his hand into a breeches pocket. There was more money in it than that pocket or any other pocket of his had ever contained. He sought to cheer himself by crumpling the bill that was pouched there. But the compensations of wealth were frequently inadequate, as almost any millionaire will tell you; there is a hollowness to them. He somehow was acutely aware of this as he took up his burden again and slipped it into the crook of an elbow and went whistling on his way. Indeed, the hollowness seemed to have got into his whistling, making its gaiety false and artificial.

Still, the open road was before him and young springtime was abroad in the land, and the sun of late March was warm and soothing on his cheek; and next, going down a slight dip in the street, he all at once saw ahead of him the pilot-house of the sidewheel packet Rapidan where she lay at the public wharf. It always had been a marvel to him that from the land side one went east to board a steamboat whose destination in a given direction was westward and that, on departing for another terminal shown by the map to lie to the south, she nevertheless headed up-stream. In any event, though, her main port of call was St. Louis; and

somewhere beyond St. Louis, as practically all the writers of a certain school agreed, was the real land of derring-do. And Wednesday was her day to clear for St. Louis and way landings—and this was a Wednesday.

It would be a mighty fine thing to walk right on the old Rapidan and go up the steps to the clerk's office and ask the amount of the fare and plank down the cold cash. No, wait, there was a better plan. How much finer and more manly, it would be if at the very outset of journeying into far parts the adventurer worked his passage. That way, his capital would remain unimpaired until the time came to lay in supplies for the long and dangerous journey across the prairies. There was, besides, a glamour about steamboating; the subtle lure of it had been conveyed to him whenever he boarded a passenger craft; in fact, often before this it had reached out to grip his fancy the moment he entered the shed-like wharfboat, with its fine assortment of smells and its heaps of cargoes bearing strange consignment marks.

And steamboat men were a superior race of men. They moved as beings conscious of their superiority over dwellers ashore, speaking among themselves, in a fascinating vernacular; frequently and always admiringly he had marked these characteristics. Even the black deck-hands were different from other colored people. There was a gipsy-like aspect to them. Of course, for thrill the marine life never could equal the life of a frontiersman; still, there must be sauce in it. Doubtless a taste of it would



## LEAVING THE CUSTER FAMILY FLAT

provide the preliminary spicing for the nobler career awaiting the gallant outcast along those wide and sweeping spaces in the country gilded by the setting sun.

## Chapter XVIII

### BANISHMENT

CAP'N MIKE GODDARD read a certain written waiver and refolded it in its original creases and returned it to its proper custodian. He stroked his goatee with a milking motion and seemed to reflect.

"So that's the way it is, is it?" he remarked at length. "Well, that being the case I don't know as there's any reason why I shouldn't give you a lift. Any bright young shaver startin' out to make his own way in the world oughter be encouraged, appears to me. But the thing is, you're strikin' me for a berth at a bad time. My crew's full up. Anyway, you're kind of small to make a mud clerk out of and you ain't had the experience, neither. There's no room for another cub in the pilot-house; got a beginner up there already learnin' the river under his daddy—young Willie Pell's the one. All the Pells grow up pilots, you know. And the cabin-boys and the pantry help are niggers, of course. Still, we certainly oughter find room for you somewheres, circumstances bein' what they are. Let me see now!"

He slapped against his thigh.

"I've got it! I'll just turn you over to Tip Hara

—he's my first mate. That's him right out there on the levee . . . No, you can't see him from here. But listen and you can hear Tip cussin' out his niggers."

A violent bellow from beyond the intervening structure of the upper wharfboat was dimming lesser sounds. It was hoarse and it was savory with strong words.

"Yes, sonny, I figure that's where you'll fit in," resumed Cap'n Goddard, apparently much delighted. "I reckon Tip Hara wouldn't mind havin' a spry youngster to wait on him and fetch and carry for him and help shift light freight and so forth and so on. He'd keep you busy night and day; I'd guarantee that. I guess you wouldn't mind his bein' a pretty tolerable tough customer; it takes roughness to handle these here lazy darkies. And he's liable to haul off about once in so often and lam you with that hickory gad that he totes. But don't you mind that. He wouldn't mean anything personal by it, not even if he was to lay you out cold. It's just his free and easy way.

"You'll have to bunk somewheres down on the lower deck so as to be handy when he needs you. That's what the rousters do—just stretch out on the soft side of a pile of freight or somethin' or else crawl in under to the boilers when it's cold. And the way they eat is, one of the pantry hands rustles 'em a pan of cold left-overs from the cabin tables two-three times a day. Still, you bein' a green hand and probably not used to layin' out nights, I reckon maybe the chief engineer might

let you curl up on an old sack on the engine room floor where it's warm; that's what the firemen do when they're off watch.

"There's one consolation—you won't get to do much sleepin'. After we get out of the Ohio, Hara or the other mate'll be roustin' you out every few minutes through the night on account of us havin' to make a landin' every little while. We can't have you eatin' with the darkies, neither. I'll tell you what—whenever I happen to think of it I'll send you down your share of the leavin's in a separate tin pan and you can squat down anywheres and eat. Well, that's settled, then; and let me tell you this, son, I'm mighty glad to be able to lend you a helpin' hand." With a pleased beam upon his face, Cap'n Goddard thrust out a broad palm. "Just shake on it once and the bargain's sealed. There—that's it. Now you're a member of my crew. Ain't that bully?"

The applicant recaptured a squeezed hand from the congratulatory grip of the Rapidan's master. He seemed to experience a slight difficulty in finding language fitted to express his gratitude. All he could say was, "Much obliged, suh," and that much he got out with a sort of stiff gulp. He gulped again and wriggled his body and diffidently, almost with a touch of timidity, advanced a tentative counter suggestion:

"Mebbe—mebbe it'd be better, rather than my puttin' anybody out, ef—ef I just paid fur my ticket, suh?"

"Oh no, you don't want to be doin' that! The

way I'm fixin' it up for you, your trip over to St. Louie won't cost you a red cent—won't cost you anything but a lot of work and some loss of sleep and maybe a few bruises and one thing and another, that's all. Anyhow, we're full up on the passenger list. Couldn't jam another man, woman or child in if I tried. Don't be so bashful, son. I can just look at you and tell you're crazy to have Tip Hara for your boss. You better run on down now and report to him for duty. Right away he'll probably start in cussin' you. But don't let that bother you; you'll get used to it in no time. Cussin' is just Tip's regular way of talkin'."

"Yes, suh. But please, suh, ef you don't mind, I just remembered somethin' I forgot about. I 'spect I'd better run back up-town first and see about it."

"What was it you forgot?" A crispness crept into Cap'n Goddard's voice. He had lost his affability; there was revealed a harder side to his nature.

"Just—just somethin'."

"So? Well, you can go, but don't you be gone long. Remember, a man's word is his bond in this business; that's the steamboat law. You be back here, mind, in not more than fifteen minutes from now at the outside. Because we'll be pulling out just as soon as they can get that last jag of hoop-poles and peanuts on board. Where was it you said you had to go on that private errand of yours?"

"Just—just up the street here a little piece." The new helper waved an arm with a curve which

included the shoreward horizon from northeast to southwest.

"Get along then, but stir your stumps. I don't want to have to be sendin' the second mate out to look for you at the last minute. He won't like it either, bein' sort of quick-tempered and——"

Cap'n Goddard realized that he was addressing this last sentence to void space. He no longer had a listener. He felt he needed one, though. He turned and called to some one up on the guards of the boat.

"Oh, Bill—Bill Pell, come along down here, will you? Come quick because the party I want to show you will be out of sight in a couple of minutes, the rate he's hustlin' up the hill." He chuckled happily. "I'm goin' to hand you a good laugh, I'll swear to that."

At eleven o'clock the Rapidan sent a roaring signal up the wharf and the clamor of it scattered the pigeons feeding on scattered grain upon the graveled incline. It roused five or six persons of the leisure class, one of them plain, the rest colored, who had been drowsing in sunny spots behind bales and hogsheads awaiting shipment, and it brought tardy travelers hurrying down the slope. At eleven-ten, to an accompaniment of starting bells jangling in the engine room and the scrape of gang-planks being drawn in, she whistled once again in final warning.

From a hastily tunneled retreat well back in the sawdust pile of Langstock's mill a quarter of a



mile away, the refugee did not stir. He had been there for quite a while; he would continue patiently to lie there until all peril had passed. Better be slow and safe than to be precipitate and sorry. He waited until the diminishing *bucketty-bucketty* of paddle-wheels and the sighing, tired-sounding exhalations of her 'scrape pipes told him the packet had swung out into the current and was really off, beyond possibility of recall, on her winding course through the lower bends. Even so, his manner of emerging from his fastness showed caution.

He sat on a saw-log in the shelter of the planing shed to dig itchy particles out of his neck-band and his ears and take stock of matters in general. One thing was sure: the glamorous aspect of steamboating had been exposed for a false and misleading thing. Well, there remained the highway, did one elect to make an exit from local parts on foot; and there remained the railroad. He arose and shook himself and reclaimed his luggage from where he had cached it in the burrow and headed westward, stepping rather slowly, almost reluctantly, a spectator might have thought.

A voice speaking his name brought him out of himself and halted his abstracted plodding. Mr. Gabriel Buckley, a middle-aged friend of the family, was hailing him from a buggy drawn up at the gutter edge of the street:

"Hello, Junior," he said. "I didn't expect to see you still around here this late in the day. No, sir. I was given to understand that you'd pulled

out this morning and left the old town to worry along the best way she could without you. I'm sorry if anything detained you. Could I give you a lift?"

Juney shook his head. Meanwhile scoring a little furrow in the earth with his foot, he put then a muffled query. He had to put it a second time, in response to Mr. Buckley's request, before the latter caught it.

"How did I find out?" repeated Mr. Buckley. "Oh, it's all over town by now, I guess—the news about your quitting this part of the country. I can't seem to remember who told me first, but it seems like several people spoke to me about it. And everybody says you're showing a lot of spunk, cutting loose for yourself. That's the way I feel about it myself. You're a dandy—that's what I say for you!

"Well, if you don't care to ride a ways with me I'd better be getting along. It's likely we'll both be a whole lot older before we meet up with each other again—if we ever do. So good-bye—and good luck to you, old rambler." He clucked his horse into action and drove on.

Was the whole community, acquaintance and stranger alike, in a conspiracy to banish him on into the unknown? It would seem so. It was beginning to amount to a strong suspicion. An hour or so later, in the shadow of a red water-tank where it stood at the outer fringes of the P. T. & A. yards, this suspicion ripened to an absolute conviction.

## *Chapter XIX*

### THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL—WITH VARIATIONS

**I**T was the taller of the two tramps—the taller and also the hairier and the greasier one—who took over direction of the division of proceeds. Having himself suggested this step, it was perhaps only proper that he should supervise the allotment of portions. He had the making of a true communist in him; that is, the more valued spoils fell to him.

“I’ll take this here shiny new knife,” he said—and took it. “Now, let’s see wot about this nice little cast-iron bank that rattles so sweet.” Under his heel he cracked the small strong-box so that it gaped at its seams like an opening oyster, then sifted its hoard out upon his soiled palm and counted the pieces with a deft finger. “Um—comes to two-eighty-five, even. Well, I’ll keep the two dollars fur the time bein’ anyhow, and Cozy here’ll look after the eighty-five. That’s his bit. And Cozy, you better take one of these two handkerchiefs and that’ll leave me the other one, and while I’m at it I’ll just stick the fishin’ tackle in my pocket—yes, and this here cravat and the silver cuff

buttons. Don't use such things ez cuff buttons and fancy neckties myself but there'll be a chance to trade 'em off fur something useful one of these days. But Cozy, the juice-harp goes to you ef you want it. You ain't very musical now," he added in a jocular way, "but it ain't never too late to learn, ez the feller sez."

He turned in explanation to the third person present:

"You see, bo, it's the rule of the road that a new pal turns in what he's got and after that it's a split, sheer and sheer alike, to everybody in the mob. But I'm givin' you a little the best of it, seein' you only just joined up with us. All wot's left goes right back to you—the busted toy pistol and the fly cop's badge and both them books—no, I better keep the books to look at the pictures in 'em—and these here personal souvenirs and all." With a generous gesture he gathered up such part as remained of the pawed-over store and pushed it toward him who a bit earlier had been divested of it. "Hold on, though!" A crafty gleam came into his eye—he had only one. "I didn't frisk you any too good a minute ago when I was goin' through you." This was a true admission, for the bill, wadded at the bottom of one of Juney's pockets had escaped those swiftly searching fingers. "Got anythin' else on you that might be of general interest?"

"Only—only that there letter from my father that I was tellin' you about," faltered Juney.

"That's right, you did mention somethin' about

a letter, didn't you?" said Cyclops. "But in the job of makin' you welcome I clean forgot about it. Let's see this here now docyment."

For the second time that day the despoiled Juney presented his official release from domestic allegiance. The tall tramp unfolded the single sheet and squinted.

"I read readin', ez the feller sez, but I don't read writin' so very well," he said. "Quit school too early, I guess, before my education wuz complete." He tossed the paper across the rails to his stubby auxiliary: "You con it out, Cozy, and tell us wot she sez."

Cozy read the words aloud.

"Well, that does make ever'thing shipshape and o.k.," stated the one-eyed man, heartily. "Now they can't no town bull come buttin' in claimin' we kidnaped the kid. Why, he practically belongs to us, ez you might say. Eh, Cozy?"

"You said it, Slim," assented the literate. He appraised the proportions of the adopted member. "Jest about the right size, too, fur doin' wot we'll mostly need him fur," he commented, and under cover of his tilted hat brim flashed a wink at the one-eyed man.

"Meanin'?"

The second freebooter made eloquent motions, at the same time speaking darkly in an argot unintelligible to Juney's twitching and apprehensive ears.

"Oh, now I git you!" exclaimed his superior, and grinned. He cupped his hands over his ragged

knees and rocked himself back and forth upon the cross-tie butt whereon he was seated. "That's a right clever idea of yours, Cozy—funny I didn't think of it myself." He beckoned the disciple to draw nearer: "Little bo, you didn't make no mistake when you come up just now and throwed in with us, and we ain't made no mistake neither by takin' you in." He recapitulated details previously touched on: "Lemme see now, you've cut loose frum your folks? And you're countin' on goin' out West? That's wot you told us, wuzn't it? Say, kid, you put me in mind of my own case. I hit the grit when I wuzn't much older'n you. And wot would I have amounted to, I ask you, ef I hadn't? Nothin'—just nothin' at all. And now look at me! You foller in my footsteps and I'll make somethin' out of you before I'm done with you.

"Here's the layout," he continued confidentially. "We'll work west by degrees—us three. We'll make fur Chi first, though—we're hangin' out here now waitin' to hop the first through freight goin' north. Why, we'll have you ridin' the rods or the blind baggage in no time. Bummin' your way beats travelin' with the payin' suckers every pop. 'Course, if your grip slips and you fall off you git ground up fine under the wheels. But wot's that to worry about?—don't never slip, that's all.

"But we're goin' to make somethin' more out of you than just a plain gay-cat. That wuz the big idee that Cozy here had just now. When we hit a town we'll send you round to the back doors pan-



"SO GOOD-BY—AND GOOD LUCK TO YOU, OLD RAMBLER."





## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL

handlin' fur cold vittles. But that'll only be fur a stall. Unbeknownst, you'll be sizin' up the lay-out of a likely house—the winders and the door fastenin's and all. And then that night the three of us'll come slippin' back there and we'll prize open a winder and we'll boost you in. If the openin's kind of small we may have to jam you through, but then you're young and limber and your bones ought to give easy.

“And then, soon as you're inside, you'll unlock a door fur us and we'll just naturally clean out that drum fur all the money and jewelry and silverware that's in it. Git the point? And then, ef we don't git shot or pinched or you don't git chewed up by a watch-dog, we'll move on to the next town and do the same thing all over ag'in. How could you beat that fur a good plant?” He twisted about, this frowsy fictionist, to grimace behind a sheltering hand at the entranced Cozy, and at that his hypnotized pupil, freed from the spell of that evilly glinting lone eye, remembered he had legs and remembered what legs were for.

Behind him, from the spot he was quitting, he heard the vast commingled roar of two husky voices. To him it seemed a roaring of malignant and thwarted rage. But he did not look back. This was not time for looking back. This was a time made for going on and on and on.

The current calendar might claim for a certain date in midsummer that it would be the longest day of the 365 and a fourth. Here stood one wit-

ness ready to debate that the longest day of any year since the Christian era began had projected itself into the latter part of the present month of March.

He stood on sagged legs with his head bent and thought back on the breakfast hour of the morning of this incredibly lengthened day. In retrospect it seemed to recede months and yet other months on back into a lagging past. Could it really have been that morning? Had all these weary weeks of aimless wandering intervened since eight a. m.?

That way lay madness, or if not madness, melancholia at the very least. So he lifted his head and looked about him into a landscape grown altogether barren of cheer. The sun, altered into a large, red-hot pie pan, was sinking to rest at a point apparently about a quarter of a mile beyond the Clark's River trestle. Even the sun had somewhere to go when darkness closed in on a lonesome world! Everything—nearly—had somewhere to go!

There was manifest proof of it. The homing impulse had laid hold on practically all of nature that was visible. On the hickories alongside the right of way the tender green leaf shoots were losing their semblance to the cocked ears of very young squirrels; they were making ready for sleep by folding themselves up into tight little bulbs and hugging close down along the parental twigs. Suddenly the boughs of the trees began to show almost a naked-looking tracery, whereas at high noon they had appeared well clothed. Robins, not yet mated

off to disperse in pairs, were flocking past overhead to settle in a thicket dormitory at the farther side of a shallow slough. Cows, drifting along a wood road through a narrow vista which seemed to fold in protectingly behind them, gave vent to moos of satisfaction on nearing supper and bed. Only a chilly damp little breeze which had sprung up out of the bottoms lacked a retiring place. It moaned its nostalgic longings among the telegraph wires along the track, and moaned again.

It was that keening note of homesickness borne on the orphaned wind that settled a question which the footsore pedestrian for some hours past—or was it days?—had been debating within himself. Now all at once the ayes had it by acclamation. It was one thing to show a proper pride. It was another to destroy the happiness of a whole household by sheer obstinacy, by cruel headstrongness.

Why not let bygones be bygones? A fellow could not forever be thinking of his own ambitions—that was selfishness. To be magnanimous, to stand ready to forgive and forget, to meet overtures for reconciliation half-way—that, after all, was the spirit. And to meet them half-way meant that one must go back all the way. Very well, then, so be it; the die was cast. He swallowed and lo, the persisting lumpiness at the base of his throat was gone. An ache of emptiness which seemed to fill his entire being had succeeded it.

For all that he was so weary, the returning traveler's speed, measured by the mile—and there were four of the miles, about—would undoubtedly

have been shown to exceed the average rate marking his departure. En route through the gathering darkness he took counsel with himself concerning the manner fittest to commemorate his reappearance at the family fireside. By progression he arrived at a compromise decision; he would be governed by surface conditions as they revealed themselves.

If his seniors still carried on the pose of indifference which they had assumed when the discarded project first came up—and of course, it must have been a counterfeit complacency painfully devised to mask their secret fears—why, then, his cue would be a cue for laughter and whimsicalities; the whole affair to be dismissed as a good joke played by them on him and by him, in turn, on them. But did their real grief betray them, did he enter in upon a household sunken to the lowermost depths of despondency, did their broken cries of relief and contrition well forth on sight of him as all seemed more likely—well, in that case he might behave differently, and probably would. A cold dignity at the outset, followed by degrees of unbending and eventually by a complete relenting—this perhaps would be the indicated line for one holding the whip-hand to take.

He went in through the alley gate; that saved him a minute, say. He ran up the back porch steps, which saved seconds. Seconds, even, were to be counted now as valuable. There were lights shining in the kitchen as he sped past it. How jolly a



thing was a lighted kitchen window with its beaming promises of food, piping hot and savory!

He was in the rear hall. He was at the dining room door. He spun on an agile toe and thrust the dining room door open and paused, his figure framed in the opening. Now for the welcome!

Mr. Custer sat in his place at the head of the table. With the air of being mildly puzzled and just the least bit irritated by an inconsequential botherment he cast the briefest of all possible looks toward the door and then, bringing his lifted eyebrows back where they belonged, he spoke to Mrs. Custer, apparently resuming reference to a topic which had been under discussion before this trifling interruption occurred.

"Yes," he went on, "Chief Bailey was telling me that the police never knew a time when there were more suspicious strangers hanging about town. Well, springtime always does bring the vags back, you know. You'd better keep the bolts fast and the outside doors locked—especially the back hall door. There's no telling when one of these prowlers might walk right in on us without knocking."

From her station behind the coffee urn Mrs. Custer's answer was a slight nod. Her face was protected from view by her interlaced fingers. She had glanced sidewise once, very swiftly. Now, as well as might be told by someone transfixed at the threshold, she had her eyes fixed on her plate. Presumably things there deeply interested her.

Custer Junior cleared his throat, then cleared it

again, more loudly. Mr. Custer passed his coffee cup for replenishment and his wife filled it and handed it back and regained her former pose—a pose which amplified the supposition that she was aware of no intrusion upon the privacy of their supper hour.

“Lovely sunset tonight,” said Mr. Custer placidly. “Did you happen to see it, Helena?”

Again the reply was made absently with a little motion of the head behind her cupped hands.

The late rover took a step into the room, closing the door behind him with a smart rattle of the knob. His father frowned a preoccupied little frown.

“That latch must need fixing,” he said with just a trace of passing annoyance. “Funny that it keeps clicking without any reason. Remind me to give it a look after supper, will you?”

His son advanced slowly to the table, moving with the dragging gait of a semi-paralytic, and stopped within arm’s reach of the seated pair. He brought a crumpled five-dollar bill from his pocket and spread it upon the cloth at the man’s elbow and smoothed out the creases in it with a very careful forefinger and once more gave vent to an *ahem*. That is to say, the utterance in question started out to be an authentic *ahem*. But it terminated as a snuffle, an unmistakable, a misery-laden snuffle. Speaking on past him and beyond him, in fact, practically through him, his father addressed the cook:

"Pass the biscuits, will you please, Auntie? Maybe Mrs. Custer will have one, too."

Aunt Mallie, who had been standing near the pantry entrance with her arms folded in her apron and her rigid gaze directed in studious contemplation of a crack in the plastering of the ceiling, stepped forward. Her ample skirts brushed the shrunken and abashed shape. She gave no heed, though. Indeed, she seemed in no wise cognizant of a newcomer. For her, too, a veil of complete invisibility encompassed him. Having served the biscuits she reassumed an aloof and immobile attitude, becoming again a graven effigy in toned ebony.

The boy's own eyes drooped abjectly. They fell upon the family cat where she was couched on the hearth-rug almost at his feet. She was no friend to him—this slinky black mouser. Months before, with the best intentions in the world, he unwittingly had done her a bad turn, as may be remembered; and when, days later, she reappeared at home, which sooner or later is what her sort nearly always do, she made no secret of her abiding distrust for him. Blinking hard, he stared down at her, seeing her waveringly as through a mist, and unblinkingly she stared back. So far as she personally was concerned he might remain in coventry forever; her manner proved that. Still, she did not absolutely ignore him. Her long tail beginning suddenly to twitch to and fro, advertised that she had at least a casual knowledge of this derelict's presence. In the direness of a great distress almost

any one of us is grateful for even the smallest of favors. The prodigal spoke up:

"Well," he said, and fought to make his voice not too timorous and to keep the tremolos out of it, but failed, "well, I see you've still got the same old cat!"

The next instant his mother's arms were about him and his head was on her breast and his tears were making the front of her frock all wet.

## *Chapter XX*

### LITTLE SHORT PANTSLEROY

**T**HERE were signals and portents; the intended sacrifice should have sensed what rode on the very air. For through the nation a mania was laying hold on the mothers of the nation. It was a mania for making over their growing sons after the likeness of a beatific image. Today, in the calmer light of reflection, it is not hard to trace the causes for this madness, its spread and its outcomes. Then, they partially were obscured in the dust clouds of their own raising; now, the retrospective finger clearly may point out how the whole regrettable thing came about.

With fine intent and her beguiling pen, a gifted lady wrote a tale of a boy who in all regards was a perfect boy, hence, a perfectly impossible boy. Her publishers turned the manuscript over to a facile artist, by him to be illustrated. Only too faithfully he followed copy. In all the land he could have found no living model for his pencil; he must have relied, then, upon what the written word told him, which stands a tribute to that artist as a graphic interpreter, but is a reflection upon his private judgments, since he, being a man who

once himself had been a boy, must have known that his topic here was such a boy as never was on land or sea or in the more plausible realms of fancy, even.

And so the upshot was that the book came off the presses with many drawings in it of this young false god whose name it bore for a title; and these drawings showed him in various postures and various situations, but always they showed him as wearing a certain garb. To make a long story short, the pictures matched the text and the text drove home the descriptive lesson of the pictures. To make a terrible sequel mercifully brief, the combined effect was to infect thousands of the worthy matrons of America with a catching lunacy which raged like a sedge-fire, slackened off only by slow degrees and left enduring scars upon the seared memories of its chief sufferers.

For, mark you, the chief sufferers were not these good women. They perpetrated the continental outrage but in their own persons they did not suffer. It was their sons, notably their sons between the ages of seven and eleven, who bore vicariously the burden of that blistering infliction.

In the case of a particular martyr—and the martyr we have in mind was none other than John C. Calhoun Custer Junior—he might have read the signs of the distracted times, and, reading them, have seen how the shadow of his onrushing doom was cupped above him like the shadow of a hand about to close on a carelessly buzzing fly. But here was a burnt offering whose flesh actually be-



gan to scorch in the altar flames before he took heed—and then, of course, it was too late for him to do anything. Probably all along it was too late. The destiny which was to claim so many of his devoted generation surely would have made no exception for him.

The point was, though, that he ignored the patent warnings. For one forerunning fact, the book had been read, and believed in, by an older member of the household; had, by a second older member, been glanced through and scoffed at. For another fact, a boy of his acquaintance already had been exhibited upon open thoroughfare in the weird habiliments of the new cult. But this was a boy not of the common mould. The bourgeois habits and customs of the juvenile democracy about him seemed never to touch this boy on any plane of contact. He abode mainly in the company of his parents and in the rather segregated social atmosphere of the Richland House, for his parents were the kind who preferred to live at a hotel, even though it might be an excessively bad hotel. He was being privately tutored, and of afternoons, while school was releasing ordinary boys to pleasurable devices, he went, with a roll of "selections" under his arm, to take piano lessons. What was yet more remarkable, he appeared to feel no ignominy in so doing and no reluctance to do so. He either was a paragon or a paradox or a prodigy, just as you were pleased to take him. But to Juney, always of the proletariat caste, and to his fellow-proletarians, this boy was a semi-fabulous being set entirely apart.

Even the parish's name branded him as an inexplicable oddity. It was a name for a born extremist. It was Augustus Frederick Prendergast. By their herd standards, an Augustus Frederick Prendergast conceivably might be expected to do any extraordinary thing or to wear any extraordinary vestments, just as the transplanted native of some different world might. What happened to such a one as he was need give no concern to such as they were. Besides, he was younger than they, younger by the chasmic and unspannable space of surely a year and a half, or possibly two full years.

Least of all did it seem to Juney likely that his own mother, beset by unaccountable and unreasonable vagaries as so often she was, ever would take pattern from the sartorial excesses which the mother of an Augustus Frederick Prendergast might indulge in with regard to her exceptional offspring. Between them an entire planetary system must intervene; he knew it intervened between him and the strange woman's outlandish son. In fine, Juney was as we nearly all are, of whatsoever age and period. Until they actually impend, frequently until they actually have descended upon us, we figure any of the more daunting and deadly devastations as being a thing which may strike at others but never at ourselves. The separating wall of an imagined immunity gives us protection from all uncommon perils. Either we remain thoughtless or we turn morbid. There is no middle course excepting for philosophers and undertakers, and sometimes I think even an undertaker has his mo-

ments when he visualizes himself as being laid out under a rival's professional touch, rather than going on and on forever laying out others which, beyond doubt, is the mental picture an undertaker normally carries before him.

Looking back on it all afterwards, Juney discerned clearly enough where he should have coupled this with that. For instance, on an occasion which he subsequently recalled with a sharp stab of memory, Mrs. Custer had required of him that he stand still and quit fidgeting while she went over him with a tape-line, sticking in pins at strategic points and jotting down his several measurements on the back of an envelope. There had been no explanation from her of this; at the moment, he merely associated it with the annoying but perhaps necessary processes preliminary to the laying-in of such simple and customary caparisons as night robes. A few hours later, she gave him a letter for posting; a letter addressed to a far-away Eastern concern quaintly calling itself a Lilliput Emporium. But neither did this circumstance arouse in him any suspicions. Why should it have?

There also were veiled references by her to a surprise shortly forthcoming, which stimulated his curiosity mildly without actually exciting him. What she vainly regarded as an agreeable surprise, very frequently turned out a disappointment; having to do, say, with a contemplated broadening of an already irksome educational program or with plans for indenturing him to one of those surviving relics of the Spanish inquisition which concealed

themselves and their real purposes under the name of Dancing School. So he went his way, unwitting of the fate that was shutting in on him, and laving in the temporary notoriety which accrued from having had an apprenticeship into a life of crime urged upon him by a visiting desperado disguised as a tramp. At each retelling, this affair of less than six weeks before grew and augmented itself, and the teller became more and more the hero of it. Vanity exalted him.

But who was it said pride goeth before a fall? Whoever it was, he said a mouthful.

The blow fell on a Saturday night in the beginning of the otherwise generally merry month of May; which was appropriate—provided such a blow, falling on such a victim ever might be said to be appropriately timed—because, inevitably on Saturday nights, a prescribed performance in the aspect of a corporeal penance took place. On all nights, in the season for going barefoot, the boy was required to fill a wooden piggin or keeler and, before he retired, to wash his feet. Except when this practice was carried out under the maternal superintendence, he did it sketchily and, with a rare frugality, he spared the soap. But Saturday night, summer or winter, an inflexible rule called for a bath from head to toe. The whole establishment figured in this schedule. What with the filling and emptying and refilling of the big portable tin tub, the heating-up of hot water and the fetching-in of cold, the putting-out of towels and the scoldings if anybody splashed the rug in the spare room,

there was a great pother which lasted for hours on end, and the house had a damp, warm, sudsy smell to it. Through the joys of his Saturdays Juney was haunted by thoughts of the routine awaiting him after supper; it was as though a flowing bar of poetry would be marked at its close with an exclamation point of distaste. Some in that household might linger over the abluent details, deriving physical comfort from them, but not Juney. He hurried through the main trial but prolonged the drying-off part for fear, did he emerge too soon, of being sent back again to the torture chamber, this time with definite instructions touching on the proper polishing off of his more conspicuous members.

This Saturday night there were special orders. "Junior," said his mother, with a hint of a mystery in her voice, "after you're done in yonder—and it ought to take you a good while, too, from the looks of your neck and ears and your knees; I marvel sometimes, I honestly do, how children manage to get themselves so potty black!—anyhow, after you're through, put on your clean underclothes and come in here to me. There's something to be tried on for tomorrow—some new things I've bought for you. The expressman delivered them just a little while ago. I thought he never would come. I only hope they fit."

As a ram lamb to the slaughter-pits he went, all unsuspecting and slick and shiny under a soapy glaze. He stood starkly, saying literally nothing whatsoever, while his mother drew from a large

pasteboard box, a black velvet tunic or coatee and a brace of black velvet knickers and a flat, brimless, black velvet cap of an undeniably girlish cut; then black silk stockings and patent leather pumps to go with them; then a white blouse having a broad collar of frilly lace with deep cuffs to match, it being such a blouse as he thought had forever and mercifully vanished into the limbo of the infantile years behind him; and then——oh, crowning atrocity to make the shuddering heavens weep!——a soft, silken girdle for the binding-in of his waist, a thing to be knotted over one hip and the tasselled ends to flow down.

For all we know, the shuddering heavens did weep a little; but Juney, for once in his life, was seized with a numbed, tearless stupefaction which caulked up the tear-ducts and congealed the very fonts of his utterance at their sources. Besides, there were no words in his vocabulary competent to sum up his sensations. In one appalling ten-second stretch of comprehension of what was meant by all the mummary which had gone before, the English language became deficient, in fact, as you might say, impotent. You know how a nightmare will petrify the tongue, will curdle the brain? Well, here was the awfulest of imaginable nightmares come true.

Speechless still, and expressing what hideous understandings as seethed within him only by slight serpentine writhings of his body, he submitted that body to be encased in the incredible panoply which the Lilliput Emporium had sent on. Being at



length fully accoutred, he caught sight of his double in the mirror over the bureau and was galvanized with a well-nigh uncontrollable yearning to run away to some dark corner and hide his dreadful self from himself. Like a bird in the net of the fowler, he fluttered slightly but he did not flee. He too deeply was enmeshed for flight; very dimly, like one who hears a truth spoken in his singing ears from afar off, he realized the futility of resistance. He partially collapsed, though, into a twistified and bulgy shape, developing curious lumpish deformities in a formerly sound contour.

Mrs. Custer turned him about and was not altogether satisfied with results. She jerked him into a more upright position and tried to punch some of his excrescences down flat; she patted and straightened the disgraceful cincture about his middle—only, to her it was not disgraceful but, on the contrary, dashing—and after all this she backed off to consider the general effect; yet was the more dissatisfied. Her subject so signally was failing to look as she fondly had hoped he might look. Perhaps that was because he persisted in looking so utterly unlike that craftily-limned prototype who walked through the pages of a novel which this spring had become her favorite work of fiction. She had counted on a mere wardrobe and on its accessories, the same being identical with the original design, to work a miracle; which was her mistake as it was the contagious mistake of many another baffled mother under the flag of our country during those insane years. The exquisite creation of

the story-book was so slim, so lithesome, and had limbs like slender, smooth, straight columns, limbs which themselves made a picture. And he had such wondrous curls rumpling down upon his squared, manly little shoulders. And such a spirituelle, winning light in his eyes; there were whole worshipful paragraphs about those eyes. And such a winsome air about him. And such ankles. And, oh, just everything!

Possibly—this notion popped into her perplexed and chagrined mind—possibly it was the lack of any tawny ringlets on Junior's cropped and bullet-shaped head which made the difference seem so great. Why couldn't his hair have been of bonny glinting gold and spun in waves instead of being, as lamentably it was: stiff when shorn, shaggy when let to grow long, and always with a cowlick riding the poll like a defiant pinwheel?

No, it wasn't altogether the head, either. It was his legs, lumpish and with abrupt knobs on them where there should have been gently diminishing curves. It was his stumpy torso, and this queer new trick he had of holding his arms stiffly out from his sides as though he feared profanation in the touching of his own person. It was the glare of mute anguish—although she, blinded by her own visionings, did not know it for anguish—out of his eyes. If you came right down to it, it was all there was of him and to him and by him, practically.

"Well, I must confess that I'm put out," she confessed, half-musingly. Seemingly she was addressing him, in reality she communed with herself.

"Even at that, if you didn't have that hang-dog look and if you'd only try to stand up straight and not keep on—*How many times must I tell you to stand up straight?*—not keep on slumping down in that slinky way, it might help. Quit slouching, I tell you! There, that is a little better." She brightened slightly: "Anyhow, I expect you'll look a lot better after you get used to them." She brightened still more, rebuilding up her shattered ideal, layer on layer, out of its salvaged fragments: "And there's one thing—you're the first boy and the only boy in this part of town who'll be wearing them to Sunday School tomorrow, I'm almost certain of that." A congestive shiver ran through his frame but she pattered on, unconscious of it: "And that'll be something. I was afraid when I first began to think about ordering them that you might be just the least little bit too large for the style—the advertisement said for boys from six to twelve. But, thank goodness, you are short for your age; that's one small consolation. I don't mind your being short. But, oh, I do wish you weren't so—well, so stubby-looking! Still, I've done the best I could with you; it's not my fault if these pretty fashionable things don't suit you. Well, take them off . . . Don't muss that lovely sash; just untie it gently, don't try to tear it off. And quit snatching at that sweet lace collar. Oh, come here and let me undo you! I declare, sometimes you'd try the patience of a saint!"

Swiftly she ungirthed him, swiftly denuded him of the loathsome trappings, and a second meta-

morphosis took place, for all or nearly all of his sudden malformations magically disappeared. She studied his sturdy proportions with the tantalized light renewed in her eye: "Junior, you wouldn't be such an awfully bad-looking boy—I don't mean your face, but just taking you all over—if you'd only hold yourself erect and not hump up the funny way you were doing just now. I only hope you'll try to look like you were enjoying yourself when you start off for Sunday school with your little sisters in the morning. Everybody you meet will be looking at you—remember that—and unless you have a pleasant expression on your face and hold your head up like a nice little gentleman and smile back at them, they'll be saying to themselves: 'Now, there goes a boy who doesn't appreciate all his mother has done for him and all the trouble and expense she's gone to, just to make him happy. If I were that boy yonder, I'd be ashamed.' That's what they'll say—and how will you feel then?"

Knowing so much as we do know of this boy, we may risk a guess as to how he would feel under these imagined commentaries which Mrs. Custer had conjured up, but we have no sure way of knowing, because Juney did not go to Sunday school that fair May morning. The summons for rising found him ill. He professed to be very ill. He had desperately bad feelings all over him. Between groans he described them to a bedside audience which for awhile was skeptical but became sympathetic. Certainly he groaned in a poorly and fading-away manner which might have charac-

terized a typhoid fever patient in the first weakened stages of mending. Certainly, too, there was a wanness about him. A malingerer might have simulated some of the other symptoms, but that wan pleading air was, beyond question, genuine.

So the invalid was dosed with a sovereign mixture of a nauseous flavor and stayed housed all day. It did not seem the part of wisdom that he should recover too soon. But to be ailing and confined on this day was no very great hardship. In that town they did not spend their Sundays, they kept the Sabbath—a vastly different matter.

True, the Custer children fared somewhat better than some of their neighborhood fared. There were the children of the McGowan family just around behind in Walnut Street; a strict Calvinistic household, this one. The younger McGowans not only attended Sunday school but they remained for the sermon, perched, like four little torpid sparrows, on a hard pew in a square, grim meeting-house with windows in it that were painted gray to shut out the pagan sunshine—a meeting-house which had but two touches of bright color in it: the red velvet cushion upon which the minister's Bible rested and a notice framed in walnut over the inner door and reading: "Gentlemen will not use tobacco in the House of God." And when the service was over these same small worshippers must walk soberly home to a sober dinner and after dinner, through the long afternoon, they might not play or look at picture books. As a very great concession to their innate depravity they were per-

mitted to swing in a wooden swing standing in the side yard. They could not "pump up" high, though, nor shout as they pumped; the sin born of their restlessness must be committed with a slow decorum, according to the ritual known as "lettin' the ole cat die." Across back-fences and in through the open window of the sick-room a warm breeze blew, laden with the scents of heretic lilacs and heathenish honeysuckles—base un-McGowan-esque shrubs that rested not on the Lord's Day—and this equally impious breeze, which damnably rippled the curtains, brought to Juney the distant dismal creak and whine of the thole-pins of that wooden swing, and he comforted himself with the thought that he was not so badly off, after all. If he had not annulled the terrible hour of his public mortification at least he had delayed it. As twilight fell, he rallied and shortly was able to partake with heartiness of cold Sunday night's supper. His execution of light rolls and pear preserves was a matter for comment.

The danger threatened again for Tuesday. For on Tuesday Master Lanier was to celebrate his fourteenth birthday with a play-party and Juney was numbered among the invited guests and his mother promised him he might wear his beautiful new suit to the party. "Promised" and "beautiful" were actually the words the woman, in her derangement, used. But, on Monday night, unexpectedly, Master Lanier's grandfather, with a grace of consideration seldom met with among the elderly, had the good taste to die of an apoplectic stroke. Juney



was encouraged thereby to hope for a continuation of the blessings of chance and cancellation. Maybe the house would burn down, preferably with all its contents. Maybe his mother would regain her reason; but no, that was expecting too much. Her frequent references to the imported costume proved her faculties must be chronically disordered. But maybe, anyhow, something would forefend him. He carried his evil secret locked in his breast and as the week passed it weighed less heavily upon him. Only at intervals, when the matter was brought up by Mrs. Custer, whose afflicted mind seemed to dwell upon her delusion, did it emulate the Spartan lad's stolen fox and gnaw at his uneasy vitals.

Friday afternoon rolled around. Now, Friday afternoon at school partook of the nature of a festival. There were no lessons, but instead there were recitations and spelling-bees, and school, for several of the classes, adjourned at three-fifteen and, for the rest, at three-thirty, instead of continuing until the customary hour of four. In accord with the spirit of the occasion many of the children returned after their nooning with attire freshened and refurbished. Girls had big new bows in their hair; boys had their faces shined as far south as the upper throat line and, east and west, almost but not quite, to the ears. Some even wore their best clothes.

Juney was among those who entered only languidly into the spirit of these weekly affairs. He believed that on Friday right after dinner most of the jay birds went below to the infernal regions to

tell the news of the world to the devil, and frequently he wished that he might have accompanied these naughty delegations. He had not the declamatory gift and the forming of the opposing skirmish lines for a spelling-match meant merely that he would drop, mortally incapacitated, at the first volley. He always did drop; and, as he saw it, there neither was pleasure nor profit in becoming a battlefield casualty and remaining so until such heavy guns as "Incomprehensibility" and "Constantinople" had been fired into the last trench where the intrepid surviving champions held out.

This Friday afternoon, when he started back to the Old Sem'nary, Mrs. Custer saw him off from the front porch. After two annoying postponements she had had her way with him; he had yielded himself with a sort of paralytic docility to her will. Had he but known it, his father might have served him in his dire emergency, for a saviour. But Juney had not thought to bespeak intercession or downright succor in that quarter. Misfortune had made a fatalist of him. What had to be, must be. The yawning abyss was before him; why, then, put off the headlong leap?

Watching his departure, the good lady wore a puzzled V in her forehead. He had behaved so strangely. He had not even argued against her decision, or protested audibly during the ordeal of robing. And now he was quitting the premises after such a curious fashion. She had seen him go thence in various moods—sheepishly, buoyantly, strutting; pedalling a velocipede and hooting sharp



A SAUNTERING FRIEND SPIED HIM; AT LEAST UNTIL THEN  
JUNEY HAD REGARDED HIM AS A FRIEND.



warnings to pedestrians to get out of his path; running in summer heat when she saw no earthly need for haste; whooping in the joy of an occasional new-fallen snow and dragging along a sled with intent to hook on behind passing vehicles. Not quite a month and a half earlier, she had been a weeping witness while he took his leave in the pathetic twinned roles of outcast and wanderer upon the face of the earth. But today——.

“Why, the child looked as if he was trying to shrink up inside of himself, some way.” She said it aloud although there was no one at hand to hear her. “Why, he scrooged up against that fence yonder and then he just seemed to—to sort of ooze out of sight. Children are funny!”

Her’s had been exactly the right phase. Literally he had oozed out of her sight. He was trying to ooze out of the sight of mankind at large. But, like all who essay to set at naught the laws of physics, he failed. The inevitable caught up with him before his warped and difficult pilgrimage was two minutes old; to be exact, it overtook and straitway encompassed him midway of the next square. It did not swallow him up outright, though; that would have been a boon than which he could have asked for no greater. It only made him the more conspicuous, were such an impossibility possible.

A sauntering friend spied him; at least, until then Juney had regarded him as a friend. And this other gave, first an incredulous gasp, and immediately a shrill howl of pleasure. And after that he fell into a disgusting and ill-timed show of

play-acting. He pretended to be dazzled; he held his hands before his face. Then he let on to faint away and flopped down flat in the dust, but rose up promptly for, on ahead of him, three more school-bound compatriots had heard his cry and were coming back, hot-foot, to help him relish the phantasmagoric spectacle. Later, they would claim credit for sharing in the original discovery.

Closing in on their prey, they uttered wolfish yelps, which was fitting. Coyotes are not the only creatures that turn to rend a disabled or discredited veteran of the pack. Boys have the coyote instinct, too—one figures boys always have had it—that is, regular boys. With them, a colleague deposed means a colleague destroyed. These boys did more than yap. They ringed the quarry about with the progressing circle of their ridicule. Chantingly, they called him by a catchword reserved for occasions requiring the utmost heights of contumely; they called him June-Bug. Now, Juney was a title orthodox and acceptable; but June-Bug was a taunt. Himself, he could not have told you why this distinction should be drawn. Nor could they. In their creed, much was taken for granted which might not be explained even to themselves. But it remained for the least of the three Irwin brothers to furnish an infinitely more corrosive insult. The smallest Irwin searched in his remembrance for the right name and brought forth a wrong one and, paradoxically, it turned out to be righter than the right possibly could have been. As he whirled on



the outer edge of the revolving escort, he exclaimed shrilly:

"Say, lissen ever'body; say, lissen here at me. I know whut he is. He's one of these here—these here Little Short Pantsleroy!"

They dropped June-Bug, which suddenly had become weak and insufficient; then and there, on the instant, they took up Little Short Pantsleroy. Before, their derision merely had been barbed, but here was a virulent poison in which they might dip the darts. So they dipped them and they sped them, and each shot scored a bull's eye; and fresh marksmen steadily reinforced the ranks so that their beleaguered target became, you might say at the risk of mixing the metaphors, the shrinking core of a traveling maelstrom. He marched doggedly onward, looking straight ahead, while about him his growing bodyguard of expert archers swirled and twisted and shifted and eddied in and out.

They fell back from him, though, at the door of the Fifth grade; they left him there to make his advent into the room alone. An innate sense of theatric values told them the effect of the entrance would be blunted were it part of a mob-scene. Even so, he did not exactly enter. Rather would it be proper to say that he insinuated himself into the presence of his startled teacher and such of his classmates as already had gathered. But sooner might you expect a brand new comet unexpectedly to burst upon the view of a convention of astrono-

mers and fail either to draw attention or to create remark.

It was true that after the first roaring wave of excitement somewhat had abated, the teacher and some among the girl pupils seemed to accept the phenomenon of his transformed appearance in rather a favoring light. For a fact, they appeared almost to approve of him. Beneath the snickerings and the simperings and the smirkings ran an undertow of admiration. But what else could you look for from individuals manifestly circumscribed by the deficiencies of their gender? Wasn't Miss Ida Brazzell a woman? And wouldn't these girls grow up to be women, too? Their attitude was only slightly less repugnant to the agonized centre of interest than the attitude of those congregated delegates of his own sex. Were a boy's memory of suffered indignities equal to the poignancy of his capacity to suffer in the durance of the travail, this hour would have turned John C. Calhoun Custer Junior into a confirmed enemy of mankind.

For the time being, he did despise all the living world, nor excepted himself from the embrace of that cosmic curse. Indeed, he hated the garish apparition into which he had been converted with the greatest hate of all; yet all the while, too, self-pity walked with self-aversion.

For the pitying there was an excellent prior cause. As the bell sounded for order and as he hunched down in his place in the fourth row of seats and strove to hide as much of his fantastic housing as he might below the desk-top, he was

thinking that no matter what horrors lay immediately behind him, something infinitely worse shortly must transpire. In exactly two hours and a half he was due for a licking. Once, and only once, in the riotous course of his late gauntlet-running had the prisoner turned; and that once, as he now mournfully realized, had been a mistake. Just outside the Sem'nary gate, when the painful journey neared its close, humiliation made him forget prudence. He kicked out at the nearest tormentor, not looking to see who the tormentor might be. The kick landed upon the naked shin of one Lish Riley who, moved by a tricky conceit of his own, was, at that moment, making driving-reins of the ends of Juney's sash and calling upon him to *Gid-dap* and to *Gee* and to *Haw*. It instantly altered Master Riley from a jester into a belligerent. His yelp of pain merged into a howl of rage. But as he bored in toward Juney with intent to strike, he caught sight of Professor Maddox, the principal, crossing the school-house yard.

"Alrighty fur you, Miss Dressed-up Sissy," he said, with his scowling face shoved forward to within a matter of inches of Juney's harassed one; "ole Pap Maddox comin' outdoors is lucky fur you, now. But I'm goin' to git you at recess." He corrected himself; Friday afternoon sessions passed without recesses. "I mean I'm goin' to git you when your room lets out. I git let out quarter past three, so you ain't got a chanc't to slip out ahead of me and run off home. I'll be waitin' here at this very gate to ketch you and mebbe I won't do nothin' to you

then—oh, no, nothin' a-tall 'cept just pound the stuffin's out of you till your own maw won't know you, even in those monkey-clothes you got on. That's about all I'm goin' to do to you!"

Now, these two had fought before. Lish Riley had bested him then; Lish Riley could best him again and most certainly would. A psychic foreboding notified Juney what the outcome must be. It wasn't so much that he feared the pain of the blows or the bruises; it was the shame of being whipped by a boy of his own size and social ratings. And to be whipped while hedged in by a scoffing multitude, and worse still, while clad in all this monstrous gear—that would be the shame and the misery a hundred-fold compounded. Yet he might not evade the coming catastrophe. To beg off, to give ground, to appeal to any of the teaching staff, most of all, to seek escape in flight—these ethically were unthinkable.

The "exercises" got under way; they were started off with a class song. There was a grievous irony in the choice of that song. It was entitled: "Happy School Days." Juney refrained from joining his voice with the jubilant voices of the crowd. Wild horses could not have dragged him into giving even pretense of endorsement to such a mockery. There were times for him when the program dragged, when the passing minutes were snails that crawled; these were times when, sending a hunted and furtive glance about him, he saw how that gloating eyes were leveled upon him from every side and how the cruel mouths of former henchmen twitched

and trembled in the effort to restrain the chuckles. The effort was futile. He had provided them one gorgeous treat. Later on, when half-heartedly he endured a licking, he would provide them with a treat still finer.

"I want a little quiet," Miss Ida would demand. "How can you expect somebody to recite a nice interesting piece when you boys keep on giggling and whispering among yourselves every time my back is turned. I warrant you the first thing you all know somebody is going to regret misbehaving. I won't have such goings-on, you hear me! You know what I'll do, too. The very next sound I hear out of one of you boys I'm going to do exactly what I did only here just the other day to Waller Wilcox, sitting yonder."

Then again, there would be times when the afternoon—only, Juney thought of it always as "evenin'"—appeared literally to fly past. That would be when, by the wall clock above the teacher's head, he saw how nearer and nearer drew three-thirty and with it the surety of bodily mis-handlement at the competent hands of Lish Riley. He stumbled out from his insufficient hiding to be felled by the first word read off to him from Ray's Intermediate Spelling-Book. He hastened back to wedge himself in again, bathed in a cold sweat and fumbling vainly for pockets in these deplorable garments of his which capsheafed all their innumerable short-comings by having no pockets in them, or, at least, none where pockets should be.

And thus, by slow degrees, by leaping flashes, the

hour of three arrived. A Reign of Terror was approaching its grisly culmination; soon, now, a figurative tumbril would be backing up before a practical prison door and a grotesquely tragic figure would emerge, not willingly, but because it just naturally had to.



## Chapter XXI

BRER RABBIT, HE LAY LOW

A BRAG student—a girl, naturally—had the floor. This was a tall stringy earnest girl, and an eager elocutionist. She was taking lessons in “dramatic expression” from a special teacher; she had gesture, inflection, and a confidant technique. Her parents agreed that she belonged on the stage. They were sure of it. They likened her talent to that of Mary Anderson and that of Madame Modjeska, and not always to the advantage of these maturer performers, either. Miss Brazzell was listening, spell-bound, as the phrase is, to this young genius’ rendition of a standard poem dealing with the recorded vicissitudes of perhaps the first authentic female banter in all literature—the poem beginning with the quoted words:

“Give me three grains of corn, mother,  
Only three grains of corn;  
It will keep the little life I have,  
Till the coming of the morn!”

A gruffly discordant voice, speaking behind her, brought Miss Brazzell out of her pleasant trance.

“Who was it that interrupted?” she asked in sharp exasperation and spun on her heels.

Up rose the hand of another favorite close to the throne; one who lived under—and gloried in—the title of “Teacher’s Pet.” She, also and inevitably, was a girl.

“It was Johnny Custer, that’s who,” proclaimed this ardent young courtier, with a glad promptitude. “Yessum, Miss Ida, right out loud he said something. He said it must ’a’ been a chicken, or something, to expect it to live all night on just three grains of corn. Yessum, I heard him just as plain—everybody sitting around here heard him. Yessum, they did.”

“John Custer,” said Miss Ida Brazzell, “march yourself up on this platform.”

He did not march but he went. He hardly was aware yet of the enormity of his transgression. In the maze of his own inner distractions he absently had muttered the blasphemous criticism. It has escaped him of its own volition, as it were, and without conscious assistance from its perturbed and surprised framer. He had no excuse to offer. It was a sin past pardoning; he definitely knew that much, anyhow. So he went, with a step that lagged, and stood in the condemning presence in a huddle which put new and deeper folds in his already sorely-creased investiture. She stared him up and down and in her stare there was no mercy. How was she to know that this shriveled, wrinkling form before her was the tenement of a blasted soul and, for the time being, of an intelligence tottering on the brink of irresponsibility.

For a long half-minute she visited her silent wrath upon him. She had decided what punishment this high crime merited; only a little while before she had given intimation that she might revive it. It was a form of degradation devised by her some days earlier for treating with flagrant masculine offenders. But before she invoked it she would abash and devastate him with her eyes. She did so, to the full. Then, without turning her look from the sagged object of it, she made a request out of a corner of her compressed lips.

"Milly Hollander," she said, "will you please lend me your sunbonnet? Order there!" she snapped, stilling the gleeful anticipatory titter and gurgle which, at this, ran through the ranked desks. "This is no laughing matter."

Right gladly Milly Hollander hurried to a line of hooks set in the back wall of the room and brought her sunbonnet to her teacher. It was a blue sunbonnet, fluted and ribbed and flouncy, and of a pattern which almost has vanished from some parts since the race learned that complexions no longer need these artificial shadings to preserve them from sunburn and the winds that tan a tender skin, inasmuch as better ones and rosier ones and weather-proofed ones may be had in handy packages of the nearest druggist or department store. It was a veritable funnel and scoop-shovel of a sunbonnet, with skirts on it to shroud the owner's neck at the back and with broad strings to be tied in at the throat.

In the midst of a joyous hush Miss Ida Brazzell

fitted this cavernous adornment upon the offender's bowed head and made its starchy cambric ribbands fast beneath his swallowed-up chin and smoothed its abundant draperies out upon his drooping shoulders.

"Now then," she said, "you'll wear that until school is dismissed. And if I hear another word from you—if you so much as whisper—I don't know what I'll do to you! But it will be something you won't forget in a hurry—even if I have to put a girl's dress on you instead of just a girl's bonnet. Go back to your seat and stay there!"

He obeyed in a creeping, faltering, palsied manner. He groped his way down off the rostrum and across the floor to his place, like one going blindfolded, the while viewing his own feet as from the slatted depths of a long tube. He saw nothing save those two shambling slippered feet, his hampered gaze being profoundly downcast. He was sinking, by feel, into his seat, when from out of the sunbonnet his speech issued forth in a tone deliberately defiant. From that distance the words were not distinguishable to Miss Ida Brazzell's astounded ears. But the contempt in them, the obvious and weighted contemptuousness of them, was a thing unmistakable at any range.

"John Custer!" She exclaimed it. "Have you entirely taken leave of your senses? Answer me! And the rest of you sit still."

A vibrant tingling quiet fell on that assemblage; every rustle and bustle died. Alone the culprit did not obey. As though he did not hear her and

certainly as though he meant not to give hark, he emitted additional rumbling sounds.

Tense and quick with the importance of what thrilling news she had now to disclose, the volunteer spy half-lifted from her place. It was as though her up-thrown hand with the fingers snapping, had drawn her tautened body up behind it.

"Oh, Miss Ida," she fairly panted, "he—he says, sort of to himself, he says, 'I just dare anybody to try to put any girl's clothes on me!' Yessum, that's what he says first. And then, after that, he says: 'Just let 'em try it, that's all, and then they'll see what I'll do!' Yessum. And then, right then, he says to me, he says: 'Now, old tattle-tale, go on and tell her what I'm sayin' if you want to; I don't care.' Yessum, he did, Miss Ida, plain as anything. . . . Oh, Miss Ida, he's still sayin' it, even after you've the same as told him to hush up. Now he's sayin' to me: 'Tattle-tale-tit, your tongue shall be split and all the dogs in town 'll have a little bit!' Yessum, Miss Ida, he is!"

This time the flaunted lady did not wait for the incorrigible to come to her. She went to him, almost running. She laid violent hands on him, and, in the way of one drawing a reluctant cork from a bottle, she heaved him bodily up out of the snug space between desk-top and seat-back into which he had inserted himself. Having unsocketed him, she rocked him briskly on his feet.

"So you dare me, do you?" she sputtered. "You take me at my word and dare me to do it, do you? Well, we'll see about that, right this minute." She

left off shaking him to send an inquiring eye roving over the scrooging expectant assemblage, then brought it back again and focussed it on a quivering individual in the immediate foreground.

"Clara Belle," she said, "I wonder if you wouldn't let me have that nice pretty big white apron you're wearing, for a little while?"

"Oh, yessum, Miss Ida." The informer gasped in her delight. With a nimble twist she was up and out in the aisle. Clara Belle might never be able to throw a baseball or a stone, save with an awkward overhand heave but, since nature balances all things, she could do what none of the opposite sex could do; she could reach up between her own shoulder-blades and instantly overcome the intricacies of a garment fastening in the back.

On this occasion she probably broke her own best previous record. Her fingers made flickering play like lightning with all the buttons and all the button-holes—and of these there were many, extending all the way down her rear latitudes from hem to hem. For Clara Belle's starchiest apron fulfilled an utilitarian as well as an ornamental purpose. Its broad crisp sash, encircling her high under the armpits, its puffy sleeves, its tucked and ruffled yoke with rick-rack embroidery on it—these were brilliantly decorative, it is true, but by its length it gave Clara Belle protection from chalk-dust and street-dust.

"Hold out your arms, John Custer," commanded Miss Ida Brazzell, when Clara Belle had unenveloped her eager self. Under this final crushing



stroke his spirit apparently had broken. Almost with a seeming willingness he did as bidden. "Now, turn around."

He turned around.

Painstakingly and omitting no button, she buttoned him up. She tied the sash, cruelly elaborating the design of its bow. She stood off and contemplated her handiwork, the onlookers muffling their gorgeous emotions as best they might, but not succeeding by any means.

"I'm sorry for you," said Miss Ida, "that there has to be a boy like you in the Fifth grade. I'm sorry for myself that I have to have a boy like you in my grade. I'm sorry for all the rest of my scholars that they have to mix with a boy like you. Now go and stand up there right alongside my table so everybody can have a good look at you. I'll show you whether you can run rough-shod over this whole school!"

He made as if to mind. He started up the aisle. At the platform step he halted and raised his cloaked head to the clock-face. Its hands pointed to sixteen minutes past three. But he did not mount the platform. He swung about at right angles. The smothered mutterings of the entranced audience turned into a large general gasp of mounting hysteria. With a swinging amble which made the tails of his apron to swish and flirt behind him, Juney was passing out through the open door into the open hall beyond.

"John Custer, come back here!" called out Miss Ida, shrilly. She ran to the door. He was gone.

Suddenly pangs of compassion lanced her conscience. Perhaps she had gone too far with him. Perhaps she had gone so far that she had crowded him over the border-line of desperation. She had heard of such things although until now it had not appeared to her that this boy's sensibilities might be of a delicate cast. Still, you never could tell.

"I remember now," she thought to herself contritely; "I remember now that when he came back from dinner he didn't seem to be himself, somehow. Now that I look back on it, he certainly did have a sort of worried, distracted air about him. But I was so busy taking in his lovely new clothes I didn't pay much attention to him then. I wish I had."

She shook her head as she faced about to shoo back to their quitted places the rest of her charges.

"Now, let's all just forget all that's happened," she said, "and we'll go on with the exercises. There'll be only a few minutes more."

She shook her head again. She couldn't understand. Being what she was, i.e.—as aforesaid, a woman—of course she couldn't.

Perhaps, though, could Miss Ida have peered along the tunnel of Milly Hollander's bobbing sun-bonnet and beheld the look on the face of its present wearer she might have had an inkling of a truth which she was destined never so much as to suspect, even. These great crises of life affect different individuals after different manners. Juney, now, had been made dumb by the first one to be-

fall; had been made sharply apprehensive by the next, but the third, succeeding the others so quickly, had rowelled him to counter-plotting. He himself was not altogether cognizant of the mental devices he had employed. These cerebrations, once his drugged mind was prodded out of its coma, had been more or less automatic. He did not know why it was that into his brain, at the height of the culminating disaster, had leaped a passage from a book much favored by him—the book of Uncle Remus. It was the captive Bre'r Rabbit, you will remember, who begged Bre'r Fox to hang him or boil him in oil or skin him alive or what not, but on no account to throw him in the briar patch. And he, in imitation of crafty Bre'r Rabbit, had practiced the same strategem; merely the principle of application had been different.

However, at this particular stage of the episode he was not concerned with any intellectual processes whatsoever. To himself, as unregarded by any, he sauntered, almost dawdled, past where the dangerous Lish Riley and an attendant group of Lish's fuglemen stood guard at the Sem'nary gate, he was saying, in a still small voice:

"Alright, Mister Smart Aleck, you talked so big about fightin' somebody, why don't you go ahead and do it? You said you was goin' to lay fur me, didn't you? Well, here I am, walkin' right by you and you ain't even tryin' to stop me. I'm givin' you ever' chanc't, ain't I? If you don't know who I am, is that my fault? Am I responsible fur bein' dressed up this-a-way? I sh'd say not! You bet-

ter go talk to Miss Ida Brazzell about that part of it. Shuckin's, you wouldn't talk to nobody! You'd be skeered. And you braggin' 'round about you goin' to lick me when I came out of school. Yes, you could—over the left!"

Mrs. Custer sat on the front porch; she was 'dressed for going abroad in the town. There was to be a meeting of the Ladies' Aid at four; but she did not intend to be the first one to get there. She had yet nearly half an hour to wile away. The front gate opened and a rather squarely-built, blocky-looking little girl in a vast blue sunbonnet and an extensive white apron which covered her quite to the knees, came slowly up the walk. Mrs. Custer did not recognize the advancing little girl; she must be a stranger.

The caller halted, as though irresolutely, at the base of the porch steps.

"Come on up, honey," said Mrs. Custer encouragingly. Probably the little thing was embarrassed.

The little thing wavered and wriggled. All at once, familiar bits of guise began to detach themselves from the ensemble—the set of the shoulders, those stout stockinged legs, those prim black slippers. Mrs. Custer gave a cry, as though a very sharp pin had pricked her in a very tender place.

"Why John C. Calhoun Custer Junior!" Almost she shrieked it out. "For Heaven's sake, is that you?"

"Yessum, it's me."

"But what—what—why—who—? For Heav-

en's sake!" In her condition there seemed to be but one exclamation to which she could lay tongue. "Who on earth decked you out like that?"

"Miss Ida Brazzell."

"Miss Ida Brazzell! And she sent you home—she let you come home in this condition?"

"Yessum."

"But why? What possessed the woman?"

"She was sorry fur me."

"Sorry for you? Sorry?"

"Yessum, she said so. Before all the class she come right out and said she was sorry fur me. She kept on a'sayin' it. I don't know how many times she said it—three or four, anyhow. And so she took and borrowed some things from a couple of girls fur me to wear, comin' home."

"Well, of all things! Well, in all my life I never knew the beat! Well, of all the impert——! Well, of all the gall. Well, of all the—but what did you say to that?"

"Nothin'."

"You didn't ask her not to do—do this? You didn't speak a word for yourself?"

"Nome."

"And you didn't try to get those ridiculous things off of you before you started to walk through the street?"

"Nome."

"But why? That's what I'm asking you—why?"

"Because I was glad she did it—honest I was, mom. I'd a'heap ruther wear—these—than to

have to go 'round showin' off whut I got on me underneath 'em."

From the shadowed interior of the masking sun-bonnet she caught the gleam of two eyes that were curiously like the eyes of a trapped animal.

"Oh, Junior!" she cried out in a fit of sudden comprehension; a wave of sympathy washed up and engulfed her. "Was it as bad as that, then? Did you really hate to wear your new clothes as much as that? And I thought they were so dear-looking! And so cute and all!"

He nodded. That nod made the cup of her pity to brim over. She committed herself to renunciation of the cherished dream, all in one sentence: "Well, then, you needn't wear them again. Come on up here and let me unbutton you and then you run on in the house and change to your every-day things. . . . But it is such an adorable outfit for a boy! And"—she tacked it on regretfully—"and it was awfully expensive!"

In a remarkably short time, considering, Juney reappeared on the porch where his mother still lingered. He was conventionally attired; on his face was a suggestion of the pleased expression popularly attributed to the traditional tabby that ate the canary; you almost could see the yellow pinweathers adhering to his lips. Also there was the supplemental look about him of a slinger who has slain at least two birds, or perhaps several birds, with the cast of a single stone.

"Wellum," he said, with an air stagily casual and offhand, "we don't have to bother any more



about those foolish old clothes—neither one of us.”

“What do you mean?” asked his mother. Some hidden meaning in his intonations vaguely alarmed her.

“Why, I’ve already done given ’em away,” he stated, as though offering an explanation not in the least called for.

“You—gave them away? Why, John Custer, you—do you know how much that costume cost?”

“You said, didn’t you, I didn’t need to wear ’em ever again? Wellum, then, whut’s the use of havin’ ’em hangin’ ’round the house? So I gave ’em away.”

“Who to, in the name of creation? Why, you haven’t been gone from here ten minutes.”

“Wellum, you know that young nigger boy named Archibald that he’s Aunt Mallie’s nephew or somethin’ and’s about my size? Wellum, he just happened to be out back—him and two other nigger boys and a little nigger child; they’d come to bring her a message or somethin’, I guess. So I gave ’em to him and he was puttin’ ’em on while I was comin’ out here to mention givin’ ’em to him to you. I reckon he ought to be comin’ out front any minute, now. I told him to come soon as he was ready, because I thought maybe you’d like to see how they looked on him.”

As though entering on cue from some unseen prompter, the object of this generous bestowal issued, at this precise moment, from behind the dining-room ell. He was the proud head of a small procession. Close in his rear trailed three retain-

ers. Two of them were of his own age, approximately; the third was a very small, very black pick-aninny—the button on the buzzing tail of a reverent entourage.

Turning his head neither to the one side nor the other, and with a great lordliness manifest in his bearing, the legatee crossed the yard and proceeded out of the side gate, made purposely wide for the passage of the family buggy. It was plain that the patent-leather pumps were over-snug upon his feet; he limped slightly. But the spirit rose triumphant above the wincing flesh. He moved onward as a king might move. He wore his finery as a king might wear the mantle of his coronation.

Nor did the courtiers in his train look right or left. Their eyes were for him, and him only. They were drinking in the glory of him and their small Afric souls were being made drunken on that glory. At each step they took they uttered inarticulate sounds, attesting an admiration and an envy too tremendous for words.

Their four figures diminished in the distance; were lost behind shrubbery. And Mrs. Custer recovered her own powers of speech.

But there was no one for her to speak to. Her son had vanished around the corner of the house. He was turning a series of somersaults in the deep grass under the dining-room windows—one somersault after another and now and then an interpolated cartwheel.

## *Chapter XXII*

### TWO MERCHANTS AND A FREEBOOTER

**I**T WAS in the season for keeping a stand. That occult influence which all in those days felt and obeyed, but which as men they are prone to forget about, decreed that in the brief interval between top season and marble season a keen merchandising impulse should seize on the juvenile male group. Chance had no hand in this manifestation. It occurred annually in accordance with a rule as fixed and orbital as the swing of the stars in their courses. It developed, not sporadically but practically simultaneously, in all parts of town. Rapidly it assumed the characteristics of an epidemic, marked by an immense activity and an unremitting attention to business on the part of its devotees. Like a pleasant spring fever it ran its course. But when the number of active customers had become less than the number of established traders it began to languish and soon had died out altogether.

It wasn't altogether that supply exceeded demand; there were other reasons. For one, the novelty of the thing had lost its sharp edge; for another, marbles were coming in and against the lure of this

revived and rejuvenated institution no ordinary boy could stand out. So he ceased to be a dealer and he turned gamester and he followed, not the spiritless and lackadaisical form of the sport which parents commonly sanctioned, but the more gallant game that is played for keeps.

A perfect ritualism governed the keeping of a stand. As regards other passing pursuits a wide flexibility might obtain, but here the conventions were fixed and authoritative. Temporarily pins became of great theoretical value, for pins—the plain ordinary pins of commerce—nearly always were the medium of barter; coincidentally, a craving for parched meal and lick'rish water was magically created. Through the rest of the year cistern water in which a small quantity of black licorice had been dissolved to give color and a brackish slightly bitter flavor to the compound had no appeal whatsoever. But now it had; so likewise with ordinary cornmeal, scorched on a hot stove and made tasteful with cinnamon and sugar, or, for more robust palates, with table salt. A week hence none would desire to lap up this gritty brown mixture from the palm of the hand. But now all patrons expected it and no experienced caterer was without it, or without lick'rish water, either.

Juney Custer and his associate, Earwigs Erwin, had abundant supplies of these favored commodities in stock. They had two tin cups, borrowed from the Custer kitchen, for measuring out the goods. They also had half ripe cherries on sale at a pin apiece and, spread out temptingly on a

shoe box lid, they furthermore had a dozen or so of minute cubes of rather weather-beaten and disheveled looking sponge cake donated by Mrs. Erwin; but these latter wares were specialties, whereas the first two were, as stated, staples.

The business being now in its third moderately successful afternoon, the members of the firm inevitably had reached the stage when more or less visionary plans for enlarging the scope of their enterprise were being canvassed. The idea was to buy soda pop, a dozen bottles at a time, and at wholesale rates to lay in prize boxes and such dependable delicacies as jelly beans and stick candy and to make up lemonade by the bucketful and thereafter to deal for cash only. Just whence might come the capital to launch this ambitious campaign was a point not settled. Here the confreres, while optimistic, were vague.

"Maybe," said one, "maybe my mother would lemme take the dollar and seventy-five cents out of my toy bank where I been savin' it up to buy me a pair of fan-tail pigeons fur four dollars."

"And then maybe," said the second, "then maybe I could borrow that much more frum my father, because I could pay it back to him right away out of whut we took in." His tone was not an assured tone, merely a faintly hopeful one. The speculator knew he dealt with a remote and highly improbable contingency. Still, confidence was the indicated mood. "I reckon he'd be mighty glad to lemme have that much, ef 'twas just loandin' it to us."

"I sh'd say! Well, maybe anyhow we both kin git it somewheres. Then ef we made a whole lot of money maybe we wouldn't have to run a stand just evenin's after school and Sad'days, because anyhow schools goin' to be out fur good in just a little while now."

"And maybe after while we'd be makin' so much we could open a reg'lar store with a sign out front and show-cases and ever'thing—*hod zickertee!*"

"I sh'd say! And all the stuff we couldn't sell on account of people not wantin' it any more or somethin', why we could eat it ourselves."

"Well, if that's the way it's goin' to be, maybe we better eat up this here cake before it gits any staler. You take six pieces and I'll take six."

"All right. Maybe, though, we better first one of us pick out a piece and then the other one pick out one, because all the pieces ain't the same size. I'll go first because it was my fambly give us the cake, so natchelly I'll go first. But whut'd we better do with there other things here? I reckon we must have mighty near almost five hundred pins took in now."

"Well, maybe we better keep on keepin' a stand, all except the sponge cake, until we git the money c'lected, because we'll need to git in practice all we kin, because it'll take a lot of practice fur us when it comes time to run that reg'lar store."

This young industry already tottered on its last legs, although as yet neither of its proprietors perceived the fact. With his mouth too full of crumbly sponge cake to form speech expressive of the



dreams of commercial grandeur which incubated in his brain, Juney Custer all at once was cognizant that a stranger drew nearer. His eyes lost their meditative serenity. A glint of curiosity leaped into them, this immediately being succeeded by a small squint of uneasiness. His jaws for the moment forgot to munch. It was as though out of a clear sky he partially had been mesmerized. It also was precisely so with his fellow tradesman.

There was something so very daunting about the stranger—about him personally and about the manner of his approach, about the very way he had of putting down his bare feet and picking them up again. Even now, at first glance of him and while he still was at a distance, it was to be sensed that there radiated from him an undefinable yet a definite challenge. Before ever he spoke a word he proclaimed to all the world, as it were, that here came the possessor of a hostile and defiant heart. As men, a few, may perhaps learn somewhat to disguise their true natures. But a boy meeting other boys generally reveals his inner self for exactly what it is.

This boy was short but plainly very sinewy. He was almost incredibly shabby. He had a square face, oddly mature, and reddish hair and many red freckles which blazed from a background of sun-burnt skin. His eyes best advertised him for what he was. He had pale blue eyes, chill, scornful—and intimidating.

As though he had been diverted from a chosen course by some mildly interesting but utterly in-

consequential affair, he sidled up to the front fence of the Custer lot and over it he glowered at the stand and its offerings, its attempts at decoration and its owners, with a leveled, contemptuous scowl. His manner of looking immediately made the entire undertaking seem a poor and puny thing; the partners felt this and all at once were ashamed and, in their shame, wriggled.

"'Ello," said Juney, with a conscious straining for cordiality.

The strange boy chose to disregard the conciliatory overture. It appeared he was not to be placated. He continued to glower. Saying nothing at all, he nevertheless made them to understand that he disdained them and their belongings and all that they stood for and were. From his silently delivered sentence of condemnation he made one exception. He put two dirty hands over the fence and began scooping up the remaining squares of sponge cake. It was somehow apparent that he had no intention of purchasing; this evidently was to be an act of confiscation.

"Those—those ain't to give away," stated the Erwin boy in a tone of laboriously polite explanation. "They was fur sale. But now we been thinkin' some of sort of savin' 'em up fur ourselves."

"I'll show you whut they're fur," stated the tattered raider. If before he had meant to eat the spoils, he changed his mind. He dropped the double handful at his feet. "That's whut they're fur," he said, and ground with his heel until the



"HELLO," SAID JUNEY, WITH A CONSCIOUS STRAINING FOR CORDIALITY.



last spoiled fragment had been pulped against the boards of the wooden sidewalk.

"Say," he demanded with a quick violence, "whut right you two kids got to be settin' here tryin' to show off so smart-alicky and braggin' 'bout whut you're savin' up fur yourselves? I betcher I kin lick you both together. I got a good notion to lick you both together right now—showin' off and ever'thing!"

As well as they might judge, this truculent way-farer was no older than either of them; perhaps not quite so old. In height, each outspanned him by at least half a head. In the very nature of things he couldn't lick them both. But somehow they knew he would. It was curious how well they did know it.

He had offered them provocation, gratuitous affront; their property rights had been invaded and boys are jealous of their property rights. They were two as against one. Finally, they were on their own ground. By an ancient and an acknowledged code a boy's own yard was refuge and sanctuary from all belligerent attack; the ethics guaranteed it. Yet even so they slid off rather than rose from the two wooden boxes upon which they had been seated and they shrank away from the fence. It was exactly as though the same set of springs governed the mechanism of their joint withdrawal. The retreat carried them back as far as the porch steps. There they halted, humbled and apprehensive. Having not the words to express their emotions, they none the less realized that

with never a blow struck they had been worsted by an indomitable force.

The sinister stranger did not deign further to ravage their abandoned store. He had accomplished his object. Hereafter this pair would remain subject to his will. With short jerky steps, like some small pugnacious rooster, he passed on down the street.

"Well anyway I reckon it ain't any use our foolin' with that there old stand yonder any longer—might as well wait till we git the money to buy the reg'lar things we been talkin' 'bout," said the Custer boy, striving to be matter-of-fact.

"Well, I reckon that *is* the best way," assented the Erwin boy. Neither had made any direct reference to what had just happened. Neither of them would thereafter make any direct reference to the outrage. The Chinese custom of saving one's face is not exclusively Chinese and probably never was. It is beyond doubt that the youth of our own race must have used it practically from the beginnings and dawns of the Occidental civilization.

This then was the manner of Juney Custer's and Earwigs Erwin's rude introduction to the boy who afterwards came to be known to them and to all of their age and estate as Banty Gearin. He had appeared in their part of town, as such inexplicable outlanders so often do appear, suddenly and with no warning noised abroad in advance to herald his advent. Having arrived, he had set out, so it would seem, immediately to impress his personality upon his generation. On inquiry it probably would have



developed that these two were among the very first thus to be impressed. Not for long, though, did they keep this small and for their part secret distinction; very promptly a considerable number were sharing it with them. Also they were to encounter the uncivil invader again and yet again but meanwhile, and shortly too, they would hear disquieting accounts from various quarters of his movements and actions.

In the brief passage of a fortnight he securely laid the foundation sills for the repute which thenceforward would walk with him and within that short time acquired the added distinction of a special title. By acclamation, so to speak, it was conferred upon him. There was no reason, or at least none understandable, to the adult mind, how or why such-and-such a boy had earned the nickname to which among his associates he answered. As regards some other given boy the cause therefor would be plain and would be plausible. It was plain enough in this case, there being a traditional rote behind it. Almost invariably any sandy-haired, undersized urchin who bore himself spunkily, who went ever primed for fighting, any, in short, who suggested a dwarfed gamecock, was called Banty—local diminutive of bantam. Very possibly this new boy had been so dubbed wherever it was he hailed from; nobody knew for certain because nobody knew just where that place was.

What the junior populace speedily did learn, the word traveling from mouth to mouth with a rapidity which would be miraculous did not most wild peo-

pies and practically all children employ it, was that he had come to live—such living as it would be—with a family of socially unrecognized persons on the banks of Island Creek, in a warren of exceeding bad standing, where poor whites and blacks as poor forgot, in their common poverty, the color line, and indiscriminately exercised power of squatter sovereignty on shanty-boats afloat and in smelly cabins ashore. Every river town in those parts has, or anyway formerly had, some such water-edge colony to its credit—or discredit.

Now ordinarily the dwellers of this particular colony remained a tribe apart. The elders intermittently followed dubious and sometimes illicit callings in a squalid little parasitic world of their own; their progeny flocked together, playing in company, quarreling passionately with one another, frequently and with fierceness warring among themselves, but between times clannishly ready to combine for mutual defense against interference or aggression from without. In such emergencies the wolf-whelp complex was strongly theirs. The highly individualistic newcomer chose to disregard the law for the cubs.

Indeed all current standards whatsoever patently were made for him to disavow. By rights he should have bided where gregariously he belonged; it might have been supposed that in these present surroundings and with these federated ragamuffins for his companions those predatory instincts of his could find ample gratification. For there were occasions when their organization took the offensive.

Within the territory which their sires had pre-empted they were invincible. When, in force, they invested adjacent districts they were formidable. Bare rumor of a threatened foray by the Island Creek Gang seriously disturbed the peace of mind of any average boy in any more orderly neighborhood.

Strangely, the Gearin boy preferred not to run with the pack. He might have captained it; already he had deposed its most recent commander, forcing the trial at the first opportunity and, for all the latter's superior weight, pounding him in a dumb and relentless fury until the loser howled in surrender. From the very outset he presented himself as that anachronism of boyhood, a lone ranger, going his single way by desire rather than through ill fortune or necessity. He was not to be fathomed; he was to continue what deliberately he elected to be—a mystery, a puzzle and to the majority among his kind a menace and a terror. His purpose, though, was clear enough. His purpose was to harry and, through harrying, to conquer.

And he did. He went out of his way to invite trouble with older boys, with boys who were larger and presumably stronger than he, with boys who had a record for prowess in combat and particularly, it would seem, with boys wearing better garments than he wore and moving in higher walks, which last classification scoped nearly all of them. He might not always conquer his adversary but never was he conquered himself—anyhow, morally he was not to be conquered. A lustier opponent

might bruise his flesh and tear his skin for him: infrequently one did. But none might with truthfulness brag that he had broken the temper of the solitary little partisan or even had bowed it.

It was foreordained that a boy who so deported himself should acquire a spreading ill-fame, first among his own contemporaries, later among their seniors. His name became, as the saying went, a household word. Notably was it made familiar after he fought his fight with that swaggering bravo of the Fifth grade, Dutchy Ruhlmann, in the shadow of the Old Sem'nary. At four o'clock of an afternoon which subsequently remained memorable in the recollections of those who tarried to behold the outcome, a torrent of the freed pupils of Miss Ida Brazzell's room burst forth into sunshine with rejoicings and saw him, unattended as usual, in waiting beyond the school yard gate. It seems there had been an appointment made; with his two knobby and accomplished fists for tools he had hammered his upward way to where now he purposely would take on the redoubtable Dutchy Ruhlmann. There was a hallowed routine to be followed and for once he followed it. Since no prior feud had existed, there must be preliminaries, then, to give color of excuse; since the challenger had no second to serve him, he balanced the provocative chip upon his own shoulder. On top of this he offered the insult direct.

"And I double-dog dare you to take it up," he taunted, still according to the honored code for duellists, then with an assured and fatalistic au-

dacity, dealt the first blow. For sheer elemental ferocity on both sides the rest was unforgettable.

Timorous-minded spectators ran away or watched from a safe distance, but of these there were not many and they mostly girls. Their classmates of a stiffer mold stayed on and looked on and, with a few stolid exceptions, quickly were possessed by a peculiar tremulousness not altogether to be attributed to those atavistic instincts which most of the descendants of the cave-dweller have inherited. The crude ancestral thrill was there, of course, transmitted downward through centuries of centuries. What the eye-witnesses saw made them quiver and tingle on their young insides, but an intangible something which psychically was behind what they saw made them tingle yet more. They might not be able to interpret it but they felt it.

Verily there was more than the difference in years and in size and weight as between the pair who contended back and forth, up and down and up again, across the sidewalk in reeling circles, against the fence, now down in the gutter locked in one tight shape, next out in the graveled street, writhing and twisting and striking and gouging until by exhaustion they both were halted, the one exhausted from beating his slighter antagonist, the other from being beaten.

There was a yet finer distinction to be sensed: The Ruhlmann boy was, mind you this, a born bully. And born bullies uniformly hanker after power, eventually becoming drunk on that heady tittle. To prove their supremacy they must strut

about, must taunt and sneer at prospective rivals, must oppress all weaker ones. Besides, they like to have courtiers and flatterers in their train; naturalists say the lion tolerates the jackal because the jackal plays the sycophant to the lordlier role.

But this perplexing alien deviated in manifest regards from the true bully type. It was to be inferred that mainly he strove for his victories not so much because he wished that fearful vassals and mishandled victims should walk wide of him, but rather because, through private and unreadable motives, he nursed an incarnate and a universal grudge. His customary attitude was not to be set down as an attitude inspired by envy—even among the primitives envy rarely satisfies itself by such rough means. Nor yet could it logically be ascribed to vindictiveness nor to plain perversity nor, least of all, to downright cruelty.

It was as though the strayed tatterdemalion bore uppermost within him an inscrutable, persisting resentment against all and sundry of this earth. Lacking language fitly to clothe the implication or minds matured enough completely to comprehend it, those he assailed and bested nevertheless well perceived that some such obscured sentiment must underly his passionless enmities. And so, since they could not understand him, they dreaded him and shunned him the more for it. The shunning part he seemed not at all to mind; as for being dreaded, it would appear this was downright agreeable to him.

Punished, on this historic day, until he was limp



and breathless and choked with his own blood that ran down his throat, he quit only when he was too weakened and too wearied to keep on. At that he did not quit until his bulkier adversary had shown a keener willingness to quit. As he got up on his unsteady feet, coughing and gasping, he made it plain that this was not to be the end. He did not say so, but the design as firmly was expressed as though he had said it. So the upshot was that, through losing, he won. The next time he aggravated Dutchy Ruhlmann, which was the very next day and in the same place, Dutchy avoided the issue and gave ground—a fresh example on a miniature stage of brute strength outmastered by an unbeatable spirit in a beaten body.

To the members of Miss Ida Brazzell's classes the thing was epic. For one, Juney Custer went home that afternoon with those queer minor fluttering sensations still stirring behind the horn buttons of his breeches waistband. He might forget date and details of another battle called Shiloh, notwithstanding that forbears of his had been there and despite that specifically it had been included among the items of an examination he just had taken as an unwelcome prelude to a welcome vacation. But this later battle to which he had been a spectator would in his mind be famous forever.

He probably would dream about it. He probably did.

## *Chapter XXIII*

“IF YOU WERE BORN TO BE HANGED—”

**I**NCREASE for Banty Gearin’s notoriety presently came out of higher quarters. This time grown-ups bore testimony to his effrontery, for this time he faced a man—one of at least thrice his weight and older than he by at least twenty-five years—and not only faced him but outfaced him. Varying and growing versions of this daring performance were passed on from one amused and mildly scandalized burgher to another. There is an ancient saw and a true one to the effect that little pitchers have large ears. Inevitably these accounts, exaggerated in repetition, percolated downward until they reached the younger members of this or that household group; then they were circulated more widely than ever. The deed in retrospect became monumental. In the estimations of his fellows it increased Banty Gearin’s stature by cubits; the dark shadow of his unpopularity stretched for furlongs before him.

On a fair hot morning Mr. Thaddeus Postelwaite was hunched on a high stool at the rear of his retail grocery, checking over returns from first-of-the-month statements. The scuffle of naked feet cross-

ing the floor made him look up. Before him stood a stocky, raggedy boy of, say, twelve or thereabouts. Under the spell of a sudden wonderment Mr. Postelwaite grunted. By reason of some inner excitement the boy's figure was shaking all over. From the same unknown cause his face was as pale as it well could be, considering how deeply sunned it was. Below the tan it showed tallowy and mottled, with little white points to mark where the tops of the cheek bones pressed against the skin from beneath. His eyes were narrow pits of hot blue flame.

"Well, sonny," said Mr. Postelwaite, "what seems to be ailing you?"

Harshly, and with a threat behind it, the boy made his answer, and a most curious answer it was:

"You take back whut you said about me. You take it back right now—that's whut!"

"What I said about you?" The merchant echoed it blankly. "Me take back what I said about you?"

Rising annoyance superseded the first shock of surprise. The very shabbiness of the small intruder should have given him humility; then take the size of him and all. Mr. Postelwaite was a leading citizen; he had an important place in the community. His plump face reddened.

"You blamed little runt," he exclaimed, "I never saw you before in my life that I know of! What d'ye mean, bursting in here like this and interrupting me when I'm busy? Why, I'm a great mind to——" Checking himself, Mr. Postelwaite left the sentence unfinished. He must not let irritation entirely upset his poise. He tempered his tone

slightly. "Say, looky here now, bud, how, name of creation, could I have said anything about you when I don't even know who you are?"

"You went and said I'd never git drowneded because I was borned to be"—he choked over the next word as though it were hateful beyond measure, then with an effort which made his throat muscles jerk he blurted it out—"be hung. That's whut you said. You said it to your boy and he told it to some other boys and yistiddy evenin' one of them other boys yelled it at me behind my back up the street here a piece and then he run. But I took out after him and I ketched him and I whupped him till he told me who 'twuz said it to him. And so this mornin' I laid fur your boy. And he wuz comin' 'long and seen me and he lit out hard ez he could go, but I ketched him and whupped him and made him own up, too. I whupped him good. I betcher he don't say it no more to nobody."

"Why, you little impudent scrap of poor white trash! Why, consarn your picture! I know who you are now—I've heard of you before and I never heard anything good about you, neither. And now, by George, you've got the gall to come walking in here behaving as though you owned the whole place—and telling me to my face that you've been pickin' on my boy—and—and everything!" Mr. Postelwaite was fairly sputtering. "I'll teach you some manners!" He climbed down from his desk.

"You wait! I ain't been pickin' on him, neither. Ain't he bigger'n me? I whupped him and I kin whup him ag'in. But you're the one I'm after now.



HE QUIT ONLY WHEN HE WAS TOO WEAK-  
ENED AND TOO WEARIED TO KEEP ON.





You said it and you know good and well you said it. And you take it back right now—before I make you take it back!"

Swollen with indignation, Mr. Postelwaite took a step forward. The boy's face was contorted into a mask of hate and determination; the lips were twitched away from his teeth in a fixed snarl. He made no move to retreat; barehanded as he was, he stood fast before the menace of the man's advance.

"You're just bound to take it back, I tell you." His voice rose to a hoarse shriek. "There ain't nobody kin say about me whut you said. I wouldn't let Gawd Hissself say it. You take it back. Ef you don't, I'll beat your boy till he can't stand up. I'll foller you on the streets and I'll chunk things at you. I'll burn down your house some night—burn down this old store, too. I'll kill you—kill you—kill you ef you don't take it back!" He shook both his clenched fists.

Conflicting emotions took their twistified hold on the dumbfounded Mr. Postelwaite. He realized here was no rebellious brat to be chastened by any of the ordinary methods of discipline. Here was a pride and a potency not to be expected in so small a frame. All at once he felt a sort of reluctant respect for his stunted antagonist. The boy was not in the least afraid of him; that was certain. An astonishing but sincere conviction that in this argument he was not cutting an especially seemly figure also forced itself into Mr. Postelwaite's consciousness. There were others in the store by now; clerks, customers, possibly passers-by who had over-

heard the sounds of two angered voices engaging each other and had stepped in to enjoy the scene—at his expense. Out of the heel of his eye Mr. Postelwaite saw a number of grinning faces. It was inconceivable that a mere child could throw him into such an undignified predicament. Yet it had come to pass.

Hesitating, Mr. Postelwaite swiftly conned the situation. He was not a hard-hearted person or an ill-natured one, either. Perhaps, too, he had thought for the future peace of mind and bodily comfort of his endangered offspring. Master Postelwaite was not notably a valorous teenster and his father knew it.

“Now hold your hosses just a minute, bud,” he said, placatingly. “Let’s thresh this thing out. I do seem to recall having mentioned you in connection with that old saying. But I didn’t mean anything personal by it. Lots of times people say it about a boy who can swim good—especially if he’s not a very good boy; it’s just a sort of catch-line. I didn’t suppose you were going to get your feelings hurt. From what I’ve heard about you I didn’t figure you’d be so touchy as all that. I will say that I don’t exactly care for your way of handling the subject; still, I reckon you don’t know any better. But we’ll let that slide by. Suppose you and me call off the quarrel. Only, you leave my son alone in future—understand!” he concluded sternly. Mr. Postelwaite had his own honor to maintain.

“Then you take it back?”

"IF YOU WERE BORN TO BE HANGED—"

"Yes, I suppose I do—if you want to put it that way."

"And you ain't goin' to say it no more about me, never?"

The bold insistence of his caller was winning Mr. Postelwaite over in spite of himself.

"No, I'm not," he agreed with rather a forced grin. "I apologize." He looked about him "Here, little Mister Whippersnapper, here's a gingersnap to show there's no grudge."

"I don't want nothin' you got," said the whippersnapper. "I don't want nothin' nobody in this here town's got."

He turned about and walked out, his head stiffly erect, and for all his dirt and his rags and his mid-gut proportions there was a sort of sullen majesty about the manner of his going.

"Well, I'll be derved," said Mr. Postelwaite, still holding the rejected dainty in his hand. "I certainly wish I might be derved," he repeated—and then laughed. To himself he had to admit that in the interview just concluded he had come off second best, so the laugh lacked sincerity. "Well, I suppose this thing will be all over town before night. The joke appears to be on me some way."

Vacation, which in prospect seemed so delectable, had its hours and its days when actually it dragged. There were no Boy Scout Troops. It would be years before a great soldier had a great vision and yet more years on top of those years before his vision, achieved and geared to function,

would get across the seas to these parts and so among us, through conning the laws of the cl which are so wise and yet so wondrous simple would come to know how a boy's natural restlessness and his natural love for adventuring may be harnessed that worthy acts rather than want and mischievous ones will follow, and still the himself be denied none of his normal impulses. And of course there were no summer camps there either. They also belonged still to a future where grown folks, some of them, would through education be cured of ignorance and prejudice and would learn that what sometimes appears a feckless extravagance may really be a sound investment.

On a sultry afternoon when boredom had made them desperate those former business associates Juneey Custer and Earwigs Erwin, broke that ordinance which was of all ordinances the strictest. Stepping slyly, they went away from the shaded precincts of Locust Street into the burnished brightness of a byway, part lane and part road, which led down past Langstock's mill to the water. Had you met them then padding through hot dust that was ankle-deep on their brown legs and had you asked them whither bound they were and, finally, had they confidence in you, doubtless you would have been told that they were goin' in washin' off their gunnells. A Western boy would have said he meant to go swimming; a cultured young Easterner would speak of the proposed act as bathing. But from the Ohio to the Gulf one went in washin', or one simply didn't go in at all. The signal for

intent—the first two fingers of the right hand up-held and forked to form a V, was the same as elsewhere, though. One is inclined to believe this signal must have been hemispheric in the scope of its use.

Now, in a town whose front boundaries were washed by two wide and noble rivers there scarcely was a proper boy but had learned before he came into his teens to keep himself afloat. Perhaps he could not float on his back yet or dive or do the overhand or the more advanced and froglike sailor stroke; but almost surely he could paddle dog-fashion, as the phrase had it. Many a father, taking his ten-year-old heir to the shallows for a first lesson, was astonished—and perhaps chagrined—to find the scion could outswim the sire.

To nearly all youths below a certain age, though, certain spots were forbidden—the little sand-bar at the joining of the rivers because of "step-offs"; the towhead at the foot of the island because of a treacherous current coursing down through the "chute"; the eddy off the mouth of the Big Gulley—there likewise the waters were fast and moved in curious swirls; and expressly, the sawlogs under the bank below Langstock's planing sheds, since here the channel set in close to shore and in times of freshets up the Tennessee ran with an amazing swiftness.

Of course this last had to be the most fascinating place of them all, what with the vast sawdust pile to turn somersaults in and dry off one's body at the same pleasant time, and, below, the captive logs

on which one might undress and dress again in comfort, and the deep holes outside and beyond the linked gunwales where the swimmer took his belly-busters if he were a beginner, or those delicious straightdown head dives if he had skill and the courage for the plunge.

As the truants rounded the turning toward the mill a recruit joined them. The volunteer was one Arthur Hecht, commonly called Gander Neck Hecht, for being so spindly and meatless. An immense and unbridgeable gulf of years yawned between him and them. For in age he could be no more than eleven years and odd months, while they were past thirteen. But they were in no humor now to draw the finer lines of seniority; on sufficiency of experience they accepted his company.

He hobbled along in the rear, striving to keep up. This gander-necked boy seemed fated to be through all the summer-time a constant cripple. Stone bruises went out of their way to claim him for their own. He had a stone-bruise now on the bottom of his left heel; always he had at least one stone-bruise somewhere. The great toe of his other foot was encased in grimy wrappings where a jagged plank edge had fanged him. Originally the wound had been enclosed in cobwebs to check the bleeding, then bound about with a strip of fat meat to draw out the imbedded splinter before it festered. Either germs were weak in those times or human beings were stronger; that is for the scientists to say. So now the victim went limping on one sound heel and one sound set of toes, favoring his injured part.



as he stepped. He made good headway, though, being accustomed to traveling thus; the occasion was rare when he dared plank both soles down flatly and firmly.

Together the trio clambered down the steep bank. No naked slender figures showed pink in the glare out where the banded timber trunks made a half-moon on the yellow-green river. So far, so good; they would have the place all to themselves and be free from the peril of older marauders stealing down to tie their unguarded garments into hard, wet kinks and then to gibe at them with the formalistic cry of "Chaw beef, sucker!" while, using their teeth to help out their hands, they strove with the knots.

The Hecht boy might be maimed but he was spry. He was the first to skin out of his two outer garments and his underpieces, also two in number, and perform the superstitious rite which fended one from cramps and slide with a gentle splash off a favorite gunwale and then, after the first gasp, to call back that she was warm as anything. A moment later the remaining pair, separating blouses from breeches, paused with fingers still mechanically fumbling at the buttonholes and on their faces looks of stricken disappointment.

Circling the outer ring of the timber crescent came swiftly the awesome enemy of all their tribe. As he sped along, balancing himself on the rounded tops of the floating tree boles, Banty Gearin's strong toes gripped the rough bark. His intent plainly was to cut them off from the water. But this flank-

ing movement was on his part an unnecessary precaution. With him present or even near by neither of them would care to carry their clandestine excursion any further. There was one gleam of promise in the situation—just one. To skirt between them and the river he must leave unguarded the route of escape leading back up the shore. At least they could go back home.

With one shrill warning cry they went then, and wasted no time in their going. The lone harrier shot at them a disdainful glance; with the start they had the pair could outdistance him in the chase. So, abandoning the vain idea of pursuit, he faced about and with a grim, malicious smile on his lips set himself to the sport of tantalizing the small unfortunate who had not got away and who now could not possibly get away.

From the crest of the slope the fugitives looked back upon the spot they had quitted. They saw Banty Gearin hunched down on a log and with his dished hands pitching sprays of water into the face of his victim, who swam with awkward, frightened strokes just out of his reach. They heard the tormented Gander Neck begging to be allowed to land. Gander Neck was starting to cry as, side by side, and slowly and almost reluctantly, they passed over the rim of the hollow and down to the sunken ground beyond. They had pity for the abandoned one but not the resolution to attempt a rescue, however half-hearted. The black magic of Banty Gearin's influence was heavy upon them. By luck,

they were out of his malign clutches; they would stay out of them.

Presently, having reached Locust Street, with its familiar aspects, they parted by mutual but unspoken consent. Each of them desired to be alone or anyhow to be free of the companionship of his equally guilty partner in the recent ignoble flight. Each was vaguely uneasy and mortified. True enough, Gander Neck Hecht was no bonded ally of theirs, no accepted team mate. Still, they had deserted him; more, they had shown nimble heels to a single enemy. They couldn't get away from that.

Speaking for Juney Custer, he didn't try to get away from it. It suited his present mood to turn the rankling thought in his soul. A broody regretful figure, he mooned about the empty yard until the shadows had begun to stretch themselves across the grass, tired out after a hard day of shrinking and expanding under orders from their white-hot taskmaster up in the heavens. Then, still visiting self-punishment upon himself, he hunched upon a lowermost step of the porch. He was there when Mr. Custer came home and his mother in a cool white gown issued forth from the house to join him. Supper ought to be ready pretty soon now and after supper he could go to bed and take his remorse with him. The knowledge that until after the long twilight had thickened into darkness a noisy crew would be playing "How Many Miles?" around the square for once had no attraction for him. Maybe when he woke up in the morning, the worrying would be gone.

"What appears to be ailing you, young man?" asked his father, presently. "Anything mournful pressing on your mind?"

"No, suh." He spoke with listlessness.

"There must be," said Mrs. Custer. "I can't seem to remember when he's stayed quiet for so long and not tried to argue about something. Maybe he's got a touch of malaria." Anxiety quickened her voice. "He seems languid—come to think about it. Maybe if I gave him a dose of quinine now and some calomel at bedtime and followed that up tomorrow early with some——"

"Oh, shuckins, mom!"

"Don't 'shuckins' me. I don't need a doctor to tell me when a child of mine isn't well. Get up from there, Junior, and come here and let me have a look at your tongue."

"Oh, please'm, mom, there ain't anything the matter with me, honest."

"Not with his appetite there's not—I'm prepared to swear to that," said Mr. Custer. "And leave his tongue alone, Helena. Probably"—he added this unsympathetically—"probably it enjoys getting a little rest from wagging all the time. What I can't understand is——"

The dolorous one straightened to his feet, being minded to depart out of earshot of such uncongenial comments.

"Oh, shuckins," he bewailed once more, and then, as he passed beyond their hearing: "Seems like a feller can't do nothin' without somebody starts in botherin' him ha'f to death." Creation

seemed to be leagued against his peace of mind.

At the corner of the house he stopped. The latch of the front gate had clicked and Mr. Oscar Purcell, owner of the hub and spoke works and superintendent of the Sunday school which he attended, had entered and was hurrying up the walk. When possible to do so Juney avoided Mr. Purcell's social attentions. Mr. Purcell insisted on calling him a lad, which was a word nobody else ever used excepting in story books and which made him feel self-conscious; and Mr. Purcell had a patronizing, uncomfortable way of patting him on the shoulder when they met and inquiring regarding his health and general well-being. But now his interest was caught by Mr. Purcell's air of evident deep concern. The latter's swift gait and the distress on his face also had the effect mildly of startling Mr. and Mrs. Custer. Both of them were on their feet as the visitor came up the steps. He pulled off his hat but he forgot to wish them good evening.

"A lamentable thing has just occurred," he began without preamble. "Most lamentable and most tragic. I stopped in to tell you about it.

"What?" "Whereabouts?" The sharp questions of husband and wife overlapped.

"Down at the river, between my plant and Langstock's mill. A drowning—almost a double drowning. One boy lost and one nearly lost."

He had spoken the words which in that town drove fright into the bosom of every mother of growing sons.

"Oh, how awful!" cried Mrs. Custer pityingly;

then relief lifted her tone. "But, thank heavens, our boy never goes in swimming unless some older person is with him. Oh, who was it that was drowned, Mr. Purcell?"

"A boy named Walter Gearin. 'Banty' Gearin they called him, though. You-all must have heard of him? Nobody seemed to know what his real name was until I found it out a few minutes ago. He was the one who was lost—I helped get his body out. And the other boy—the one who barely was saved—he was this little shaver, Arthur Hecht, the son of those Hechts that live three squares from here, over toward the river front."

"Yes, I know. Go on. When did it happen?"

"Yes, and how?" supplemented Mr. Custer.

None of them for the moment took note that Juney, moving with stiff steps like an automaton suddenly galvanized into action and with eyes wildly distended, had joined their group.

"Just a moment, please—I'm about out of breath," said Mr. Purcell. "Well, it seems from the best accounts available that this little Arthur Hecht must have slipped away from his home about half past three or four o'clock this evening, and he went down to the sawlogs——"

"Oh, those terrible sawlogs! I might have guessed that's where it would be."

"Yes ma'am; that's where he went. And presumably this Gearin boy must have gone along with him or else met up with him soon after he got there. Nobody knows for certain, though, about this point, because the Hecht boy after he came to seemed to



go out of his head from fright or shock, and nobody's been able to get anything coherent or connected out of him. All we do know is that one of the hands up at the planer remembers having seen him splashing about in the water just outside the gunwales and the bigger boy squatting down on one of the logs apparently playing with him. Possibly they were chums—although they say the Gearin boy never seemed to have a chum before this. Well, anyhow, not five minutes later the same man happened to look that way again just in time to hear the Hecht boy cry out and to see his head bob under. With that, young Gearin, who still had his clothes on, jumped right in—he could swim beautifully, they tell me—and he swam out and caught the Hecht boy by the hair as he came up again. It was a most gallant thing he did—poor, misunderstood, heroic little chap—and he sacrificed himself doing it, too."

"Did you say 'misunderstood,' Mr. Purcell?"

"Yes, I did—misunderstood and misjudged, too—I'll come to that in a minute. The mill-hand—Farnum is his name—he called out to some of the other hands and they ran down the bank to the water. But before they got there—the whole thing must have happened very quickly—the two boys, clamped together, had been carried downstream some sixty or seventy feet and were well out from shore. By main force and grit, though, the Gearin boy worked his way back to the bank, still holding fast to the Hecht boy and dragging him along after him. He actually brought him right up to the

bank alongside a sort of skiff landing that's moored below my factory just as these men got there. And he said to them, 'I'm all right—lift him out first.' They dropped down on their stomachs, two or three of them, and stretched out their arms, and he sort of shoved and jerked the Hecht boy around in front of him so they could reach with their hands, and then they hauled little Hecht out and stretched him on the planks. He was unconscious from the water he'd swallowed. And then as they looked up again expecting to see the Gearin boy climbing out by himself they realized that he'd disappeared. In that same second or two he'd gone out of sight and he never did come up any more, either. Some of them think cramps must have seized him, but a very swift current makes in right at that point and my own theory is that he was so played out from his efforts in saving his comrade that his own strength gave out on him all of a sudden and then the current caught him and swept him under the float and held him there.

"The first I knew of it was when someone came running up to my place in a great state of excitement to borrow some grappling-irons that we keep there for just such emergencies. And my foreman went down with me and we got in a skiff and rowed around the spot, dragging the bottom, and in about half an hour the hooks caught in his clothes and we brought him up. But by that time it was too late—he was dead. We worked over him; no use.

"Then I had another hard job on my hands. I had to go up to Island Creek and break the word

to the people he lived with—his aunt and uncle. And they turned out to be typical Creekers—you know—semi-savages; and they live in one of the toughest looking shanties along the creek, which is saying a good deal. I don't want to be unjust but it struck me that neither of them was exactly grief-stricken over hearing the news; they almost behaved as though they were saying to themselves 'Good riddance.' But I did find out a thing which helped to explain certain other things—for one, why this urchin went about like a sort of half wild, forlorn, lonely little Ishmaelite, with a chip forever on his shoulder, and also why he made that scene down at Thad Postelwaite's store here about a month or so ago. You remember hearing about that, I presume, both of you? I laughed at it at the time; it struck me as humorous when all the time if only I had known the truth——"

"But what was the truth?" Mr. Custer broke in. His son crept nearer until he stood, breathless and stunned, in his mother's shadow.

"I'll tell you. Does the name of Gearin mean anything to you particularly? No? Well, it didn't mean anything to me either until after I'd talked with those untamed people up there on the Creek. But don't you recall, Custer, that here about two or three years ago, down yonder in Bland County near the State line, a man named Joab Gearin was lynched by a mob for committing an atrocious murder? You do remember it now, eh?—I thought you would. Well, that same Joab Gearin was this boy's own father. And as he had no mother it

seems that eventually he made his way up here to live with the only kin-people he had anywhere. And ever since he'd been going about nursing his dreadful secret—of course to him it was very dreadful—and figuring the whole world to be in a plot against him and, boylike, resenting it in the only way he knew—with his fists. At least that's my deduction, and logically I don't see how there can be any other. And here was this townful of people branding him as a hardened little ruffian and a bully when all the while what the child really needed—what, no doubt, he craved for without being able to express it and without knowing how to go about winning it—was a little friendship, a little companionship—yes, and a little pity. And with good stuff in him too—it only needed today to bring that out and prove it—courage and manliness and the willingness to lay down his life for another. 'Greater love hath no man'—eh, Mrs. Custer!"

But Mrs. Custer made no answer. She was sobbing quietly and between sobs saying under her breath "Oh, the poor pitiful little thing!"—saying it over and over again.

"I only wish somebody had interested themselves in him—he might have been redeemed," Mr. Purcell went on. "I only wish I had. I used to see him wandering around my place, always alone and always so glum and sulky looking. Maybe if I'd spoken kindly to him I might have won him over; might even have gotten him into our Sunday school. But it's too late for that now. There's just one thing

we can do, Custer, and I look to you and a few others to help out there.

"His own people aren't able to give him decent burial. I doubt if they know where their breakfast is coming from tomorrow morning. So it's my idea that we ought to take up a subscription to give that little hero a funeral such as he deserves—a public funeral. We'll give everybody a chance to make some sort of amends for their neglect of him while he was alive. I thought we'd hold it at our church and ask some of the other ministers to assist Doctor Glade in the service there and also out at the cemetery. What do you think of it?"

"I think well of it," said Mr. Custer, huskily. "Put me down for as much as anybody else gives. And for flowers besides, Purcell."

"I knew you would. Oh yes, I had another plan—I was going to suggest that the sons of, say, six representative citizens—boys of approximately his own age—should act as the pall-bearers. That would help to express popular sentiment about as well as anything I can think of—a tribute and a symbol as well. I thought of choosing your fine son here, for one. How about it, lad?"

He looked toward the smallest of his listeners and that one, with his face hidden on his breast, nodded assent. Blindly his mother reached out one arm and drew him to her in a hard, shuddering embrace. He never looked up, though. Utter misery held him. He felt as though he must choke on a hard, bitter lump that had come into his throat. If only

he hadn't run away perhaps it never would have happened!

They rather specialized in funerals in this town; some persons prided themselves on never missing one. Certain individuals even went to the funerals of total strangers. Still, this in no wise distinguished the town from a thousand others of like size, or less, or greater. Especially before the movies came along the populace in the average smallish inland community lacked for gentle excitement. But for this particular funeral none who conveniently could get to it failed of attendance.

The church service was ended; the conclusion would be at the grave. The lid had been fitted to the small white box with its silver handles. But before this all who cared to do so—and nearly all present did care, it seemed—passed where it rested at the head of the center aisle on black trestles with flowers banked high about it and looked solemnly down upon the face of the dead boy.

The special pall-bearers looked, too. They wore their garb for Sundays and high days—starched white wide collars turned flat on their shoulders and big ties under their chins; coats buttoned; black stockings and stiff newly blacked shoes on their cramped feet; likewise, upon the left sleeve of each was a wide crepe band and on their hands were white cotton gloves. Almost fearsomely they had looked and had seen Banty lying there—the same Banty they knew, and yet a different one. His hair



seemed redder, but perhaps that was because his face now was so white. His freckles were faded to little pale specks and his nose was pinched in curiously. Of course his eyes were closed; that made a difference, too—and his jaw had dropped just the least bit so that the tips of his lower teeth showed between his lips. But his mouth still was set in its old square shape. It was the set of the mouth more than any other thing which made them realize that death had not really altered him.

There was a rustle of rising bodies. Minding a signal from Mr. Purcell, the pall-bearers left the front pew where they sat and ranged themselves in a double row, three on either side of the white box.

Under cover of the small subdued noises about them Earwigs Erwin spoke in a low mumble to the boy just ahead of him. Earwigs couldn't hold in any longer:

"It's awful funny," he said, "ain't it, Banty goin' and gittin' drowned after whut Mr. Postelwaite said that time about him bein' born to be——?"

"Sh-h," hissed Juney Custer, reproachfully. "Don't you know any better'n to be sayin' that when you're right here alongside of him?"

"That's right," whispered the warned Earwigs, contritely; "gee, I'm sorry."

They both felt the presence of Banty's spirit, implacable as ever, unbreakable as ever.

## Chapter XXIV

### P. T. BARNUM PASSES THROUGH

AS regards circuses it might be said, for Juney Custer, that each one of them spaced itself off into specific but inter-related and, to an extent, overlapping phases of the single co-ordinated event. Generally speaking, the same might be said for the members of his set. To begin with, there was the happy day when word spread that The Circus was coming. At this stage it always was The Circus that was coming; not just a circus or just any circus. After the transaction had been completed there might be occasions when the merits of this particular circus would be matched, for purposes of comparison, against the merits of some circus of former years. But not now.

Now a fellow gave his undivided allegiance to this circus rather than bestowed any part of it upon an earlier circus whose remembered glories had, with the passage of time, lost their richer tints. From the hour when the tidings came out in the Daily Evening News, or, lacking that advice, from the hour when the show-bills went up in store-windows and on dead-walls in town and broke out, like a prismatic rash, along the sides of blacksmith shops and tobacco barns all over the country, it

was a point of honor to be committed to an unfaltering belief in the superiority, in all possible regards, of the circus due to appear, rain or shine, on a given date—a date which immediately stamped itself as with branding irons into his consciousness and to which all other dates became subservient and of infinitely less account. This one must be the very biggest circus that ever was or ever would be. It just naturally had to be. The language of its advertising—mostly adjectives—so guaranteed, and no proper-minded boy in his early teens would permit himself to think to the contrary. He had no desire to think the contrary. He strengthened his fidelity with quotations from the billboards: *Ferocious Denizens of the Jungle*, from *Sun-Bright Dens Hungrily Surveying the Surging Throngs—Hod dog!* *Glittering Graceful Galaxies of the World's Most Famous Bareback Riders—Hod zick-ertee!* *Challenge Herds of Ponderous Performing Pachyderms in Quaint Elephantine Revels and Monstrous Marvelous Maneuvres—Gee!* *Golden Allegorical Floats and Dazzling Tableau Chariots in a Well-nigh Countless Congress of Panoramic Splendor—Oh, geemanently!* There was treason in it and rank heresy, there was for him secret pain and affront in it, did some older person in his presence cast doubt upon these proprietorial troths now being plighted broadcast so lavishly. It was like a jab at the hearer's heart; it made his sense of loyalty to drip blood.

Right on up to and through the great day he carried within him this abiding confidence in the

integrity of the owners. At daybreak he carried it to the yards where he went to attend the unloading; carried it thence to the showgrounds there to watch while the tents rose and to see how all the various uncoiled odds and ends of the vast enterprise could reel themselves back again into a harmonious whole. If the array spread before him rather tended to prove that the management in its prior publicity somewhat had exaggerated the scope and abundance of its offerings, still his soul told him his eyesight must be wrong. It might be that some inconoclast pointed out there had been advertised a pledge of fifty cars whereas sunrise on the sidings revealed the presence of only twelve of the blue flats and fourteen of the red-and-yellow coaches. For his part, his faith remained unshaken. He comforted himself with the thought that doubtless many more belated cars would be arriving during the morning. In the moving of such a circus as this one was, the railroad hands were bound to mislay a train or two once in awhile, weren't they? Well then, what about that, Mister Smarty, since you know so much?

It distressed him yet more to learn of any spoken disparagement for the grand free street parade; especially because in this he aimed to take a volunteer part. When from some point of vantage along the route he had checked off the passing of the forward divisions, he would streak away toward the tail of the procession to fill a place picked on in advance. He accompanied the lady snake-charmer on her triumphant way, at intervals reach-

ing up over the rumbling wheels to press a sweaty palm against the glass-walled cage in which the fearless lady sat amid her loathsome and venomous pets, wearing one smallish venomous pet for a neck-piece; or else he tagged in the dust of the clown who rode in the January cart at the extreme rear. There was a governing formalism here. Beforehand fellows debated the pleasures of traveling behind the clown wagon as contrasted with the advantages to be derived from service in the honor-guard to the lady snake-charmer; only here and there was an eccentric who preferred marching with the steam calliope. But no matter whether a fellow's role was that of entranced bystander on the sidewalk or member of one of the escort bodies, his ears remained keenly sensitive to any impious comments affecting the completeness of the show. This was to be said: Even from the most jaded oldsters he heard few, if any, wounding strictures, provided only that the show-stock was sleek and showed blood and good treatment. In a section where so many bred or owned or raced horseflesh and where practically everybody loved the horse, a fine turn-out of sleek draught-animals would atone for a host of deficiencies.

True, a period of disenchantment frequently followed the exhibition itself. The eye was sated from gazing upon many wonders; the body was tired and cramped after perching for two hours or more upon a hard and narrow plank. As you plodded wearily out into the glare of the late afternoon you observed that the show-ground had re-

solved itself back into a mere common, dusty and scuffed and trampled. Viewed now from without, the tented city had become a quite commonplace huddling of stained and weather-beaten canvas, upheld by scarred blue poles and stayed with ordinary ropes, frayed and soiled. Having revealed its mysteries, it had itself ceased to be mysterious. There was a sort of flat dried-out taste in your mouth. You had the flabby, deflated feeling which, twelve hours hence, would visibly be afflicting those rubbery iridescent globes, green, blue, purple, red—but mostly red—such as accommodating hawkers all day had been pressing upon the favorable attention of parents of young children. People who remark upon how hard the morning after is on a chronic drinker seem to forget how much harder it is on a toy balloon. And if you attended the night performance, the disillusionment acquired emphasis, for then the roof of the menagerie slid flapping down almost on the heads of tardy arrivals as they passed through the connection, stumbling in their haste lest they miss the grand entry; and supers were razing sidewalls and loosening guys and tearing down unoccupied stretches of seating-space long before the hippodrome races had started; even were reefing in the main top from right above a fellow's head, so that, staring on up and up past the glare of the gasoline lights, he could see, away off yonder, the twinkling stars.

Coming forth with the rest of the family, at four-thirty on a steamy July day, Juney suffered from that sensation of an utter let-downness. It per-





COMING FORTH WITH THE FAMILY, JUNEY  
SUFFERED FROM A SENSATION OF LET DOWN-  
NESS



sisted with him through to bedtime; travelers returning after a world's tour have it, I believe. He looked back on certain flaws and imperfections noted in connection with the recent entertainment. There was the side-show, now: In the side-show he had detected the wild man in the act surreptitiously of stuffing down the last of a cream pie. Somehow, cream pies did not seem suitable provender for wild men. According to the promises of a gentlemanly announcer within and of a painted banner without, the tattooed man had acquired his myriad illustrations at the hands of man-eating cannibals after being cast away upon a remote island of the South Seas. Yet Juney, in passing along, had taken note that the celebrity's epidermic etchings included a spirited representation of a locomotive and three intertwined links of a symbolic chain and a passable likeness in primary blue of America's most distinguished heavy-weight pugilist. What would the naked man-eaters of the South Seas know about the Odd Fellows and John L. Sullivan?

The question aroused captious doubts in one's mind; it brought up suspicions of the practice of a deliberate duplicity. Also, at the conclusion, he had expended a whole quarter, treasured until now in the face of numerous temptations to invest, upon a book commended to him by an affable agent. It was a compact book in brown paper covers. Its title won him. It was such an expansive title. The genial salesman rattled it off without pausing for punctuation or the intaking of breath: "Life of

Hon. Phineas T. Barnum, Comprising His Boyhood, Youth, Vicissitudes of Early Years; His Herculean Struggles, Brilliant Enterprises, Astonishing Successes, Disastrous Losses, Napoleonic Triumphs; His Reception by Kings, Queens, Emperors, and Nobility Everywhere; His Genius, Wit, Generosity, Eloquence, Christianity, &c., &c. Elegantly illustrated."

While bringing his purchase home with him Juney had made private calculations as to the probable effects of his perusal of it. In a sort of way he counted upon its contents to lift him out of his present fault-finding attitude into that glamorous frame which had exalted him earlier in the day. But on reading he found it, in the main, disappointing. It would appear that Mr. Barnum never in person had invaded the wilds of Africa or Asia to capture those rarer and fiercer inmates of his strongest cages. He had not even been a slack-wire walker or a trapeze performer. He might have given his life to praiseworthy deeds; granted! The book said so, and the book must be right, since it had Mr. Barnum's own sanction. But it had not been such a very spectacular career, as Juney viewed the matter of careers. See what Mr. Barnum's opportunities had been, he the chief owner of the Greatest Show on Earth and all like that!

Yet all the time, even while the critical pose pressed most strongly upon him, Juney somehow knew—and inwardly rejoiced to know—that by tomorrow the incomparable beauties of the circus would renew themselves in his mind. This had

been so, in the instances of previous circuses; certainly it would continue to be so. When, in the company of friends, he relieved the perspective glories of Circus Day, step by step and hour on hour, the pictures would grow in size, would each glow with brilliant hues, would all once more become noble and perfect. He was sure of it and the assurance gave him a vague comfort.

## Chapter XXV

### CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER STRANGER

**A**N appointment had been made for a tribal rally next morning on the show grounds. It would be the beginning of practically an all-day session. Everybody was to get there early, right soon after breakfast, if possible. Delay might mean some stronger rival crew would preempt the best sites. Juney, as we knew, usually was prompt in his attendance when musters were afoot. But today he was delayed; in fact, through all the forenoon he was an absentee. Something happened.

It happened so: With his thoughts set upon reaching the appointed rendezvous by short cuts, he scaled the side fence of Major Woodward's place and descended into Chestnut Street almost on top of a strange boy loitering along with his hands in his pockets and his lips pursed for whistling. There was at once something alluring about this boy. He had a devil-may-care style about him; the style of a traveled person who only mildly is interested in these fresh scenes now presenting themselves to his attention. It was Juney who made the opening peace-sign. At first sight he had drawn slightly away from the peregrin. He angled closer, clearing his throat.



“Ello, there,” he said.

“Ello yourse’f and see how you like it,” said the other. He was reasonably cordial but circumspect. Within half an hour these two might be sworn confederates, exchanging confidences and laying plans for cooperative effort. Then again, within that same half hour they might be embattled enemies; there was no telling. But before either contingent developed there must be an introductory period during which each would remain wary, restrained, feeling out the atmosphere.

Juney was aware of a smaller boy, bearing a family resemblance to the stranger, who sidled up now and anchored in the lea of the latter, contemplating things with round unwinking eyes. He indulged in an economic jerk of his thumb in the direction of this third party.

“Who’s that kid?” he asked. The word *kid*, though, was spoken with the conciliatory and not the offensive inflexion.

“My brother. I got four more brothers home.”

“I got a couple of sisters, myself,” said Juney. The other had scored here. Brothers, even little brothers, were potential assets; but sisters of whatsoever age could be regarded only as liabilities. You might mention them but you did not boast of them. He put the next question:

“Where do you live? My house is right ’round here on the other side of this square. You kin see it from the corner yonder.”

“Out on Etown Row, back of the new shops. We ain’t been livin’ here but two weeks.”

"I been livin' here all my life, purty near it, 'cept when our fambly was goin' 'round the country or somewheres." Juney spoke as a seasoned voyager into far principalities might speak. "My father, he's named John C. C. Custer Senior. He's a rehandler. You know that there biggest warehouse down yonder at the foot of Jefferson Street? Well, that's my father's warehouse. He's got some partners or somethin' but he's the biggest one in the firm. He's the biggest rehandler in this whole town. And my Uncle Paul, he's a cap'n in the State Guard. And he belongs to all the lodges—all the good ones, anyhow."

The newcomer declined to be impressed. He presented his own claim for consideration as one conscious of its superior value:

"My father's an engineer on the road." The bragging shaft struck in. He pressed the point: "'Tain't just a freight run he's got. It's a reg'lar passenger run. He takes out old Number Six."

"Old Number Six?"

"Don't you know whut is Number Six? Seems like you don't know so very much, then. She's the Memphis flyer, that's whut she is. I reckon you must a'heard tell of my father, even ef we ain't been here very long. He's P. J. Gorman, that's who."

The preliminaries had reached the turning-off point. From here on, either they would pursue a hostile slant or grow in sociability. Juney switched them into the friendlier trend:

"Whut do they call you fur short?"

"Roxey."

"Well, nearly ever'body calls me Juney."

"Juney, huh? Well, I guess that ain't such a bad name to go by. Say, I'm goin' to follow railroadin', too. When I'm sixteen I'm goin' to git a job as caller. Maybe when I'm only fifteen I'll git it. One of my brothers he's already a wiper out at the roundhouse and purty soon he'll be firin' extra on one of the yard-engines. He's awful old, though—goin' on nineteen." It was his time to interrogate: "Whut grade you in?"

"I been in the Fifth this year. But next session I'm goin' be in the Sixth. I just been promoted."

"I'm goin' to the Sisters' next fall—me and him both." Roxey motioned toward his ruminative relative. "Say, Juney, do you smoke?"

"Sometimes," said Juney, with the manner of one trying to remember when he last had indulged; "but I ain't smoked so very much lately."

Thus far the advantages in personal background had been decidedly on the opposite side. So he deemed it unnecessary to go into details—to explain that to date his smoking had been confined to cigarettes of corn silk and porous bits of grape vine and those fluffy pods of the life-everlasting plant known as "rabbit tobacco" and once—but only once—a section of the rattan shaft of a discarded umbrella.

"Well, I don't smoke much myself, neither," said Roxey. "But I chew nearly all the time. Chewin's

a heap more fun than smokin'—keeps your teeth frum rottin' out on you, too. I chew both kinds—homemade twist and brought-on; it don't make any diffe'nce to me. How about you—do you chew?"

With a mental reservation, Juney nodded. Why tell that heretofore the materials for his experiments in this line had been restricted to taffy tulu and the sticky exudations of certain trees—notably the peach and the sweet gum? If you chewed, why you chewed, and that was sufficient.

"I feel sort of like takin' a chew right now," continued Roxey. He drew from his pocket a quarter-section of a square of the pressed and processed weed, forbiddingly dark in color. "Here's some good old Cup Greenville plug that I hooked out of my father's overhalls—it's got a little lubercatin' grease on it, but that only makes it better." He set it between his jaws and wrangled off a sizable portion. This done, he extended the fragment toward Juney. "Take plenty, yourself," he invited hospitably.

Juney was nipped in a spring-trap. He might not draw back. He put forth a somewhat limp hand, accepted the offering and partook sparingly of Roxey's generosity. A pungent and not altogether unpleasant flavor of licorice and train-oil and something else followed his biting.

With a histrionic *sang froid* the donor sent a stream of clear amber spurting out through a handy gap in his upper front teeth. He hummed the chant of the practiced addict:

“Chaw my tobacco,  
Spit my juice,  
Love Miss Cindy—  
But ’tain’t no use!”

His eyes fell on Juney. That one no longer masticated. His lower jaw hung slightly agape. On his face was an abstracted, querulous, far-away look.

“Whut’s the matter you ain’t chewin’?” inquired Roxey. “Whut you done with yours?”

“Swallowed it.”

“Swallowed it!” His nonchalance lifted from the astonished Roxey. “Whut fur?”

“Oh, I always swallow mine after I git through chewin’,” said Juney, with what was meant for an airy gesture. This, in a measure, was true. If once is forever, why then he always swallowed his. It had slipped down of its own accord. He was not conscious of having gulped. One instant he was gingerly rolling the formidable morsel upon his tongue; the next instant it was gone. And yet not gone, either. He somehow was acutely aware that he still had it. It was as though it were a little watch which, no matter where concealed, continued audibly to tick.

“Gosh dern!” exclaimed Master Gorman, no longer the sophisticate. He said it again, fervently, almost reverently: “Gosh dern!” He fell away. “Well, I guess we got to be movin’. Come on here, Gene. Well, so long, Juney, see you ag’in sometime.”

He went away. He looked back as he went.

He might be hardened but he was not adamant. It would behoove him to walk warily in this realm where indurated habitues made tidbits of their quids and swallowed them.

Juney also was moving off, in a different direction though, toward home. Something subtly warned him home was the place for him. He began to trot. As he turned into the yard a quick dizziness assailed him and a curious queasiness spread within him until it filled his being almost to overflowing. Suddenly there was a clammy dew on his forehead. He was by no means hungry. He was as far from being hungry as ever he could recall having been. But all at once he craved to eat something. He craved this something, not for sustenance but for ballast. A brackish-tasting fluid flooded his mouth; a sea-faring person would have said there was a flush of bilge in the lower cargo holds. He locked his mouth tightly, breathing hard through his nose.

He was reeling as he plunged into the cool well-house behind the kitchen. There, up-ended and half submerged in the cold water, he saw, as through a film, what he sought for—the butt of a watermelon left over from a watermelon-cutting of late the evening before, after the return from the circus; and nearby, on the mortared slab of the tank, a butcher knife for slicing. He fell to and he ate of that watermelon. The more he ate of it the less he wanted of any of it. But he ate, in great choking mouthfuls. It spoke marvels for the matchless chemistry of this boy's digestive ap-



pliances that he got most of it down. Toward the last it seemed to him that he had three sets of hands, like one of those spidery-looking East Indian idols, and that each set of hands was holding a crescent-cut segment of drippy red watermelon meat up to his face. To be on the safe side, he fed on the middle slice. Next, by virtue of a succeeding optical illusion, the three repellent half-moons multiplied themselves into a whole gallery and battery of half-moons, all shimmering and dancing before his glazed eyes.

In the nick of time he lurched out of the well-house. Ten feet away a swimming world surged up straight on edge in front of him and he clutched at the advancing grass roots. As the drunken earth flattened down again he went down with it, on his side, behind a tree. After a space he raised himself upon all fours and dragged off to a point farther on, beneath a sister-tree. He remained there for quite a while, his face turned resolutely away from the spot he just had quitted. He had been witness to the demonstration of a great phenomenon. He had been more than a mere witness, he also had been a participant in it. It was this: A fellow could eat just a portion, a section, no more really than the quarter part of a moderately juicy ten-cent watermelon and yet give up what, by volume, certainly equalled the cubic contents of at least five or six ten-cent watermelons.

It was an hour before he felt equal to sitting up; yet another hour before he durst rise erect. But

at twelve o'clock he was able to look upon dinner without retching and to sample of it, rather daintily and indifferently—another magnificent tribute to the sound resiliency of his inner tissues.

## *Chapter XXVI*

### THE SURPRISED PARTY

**B**Y being puny he had lost much valuable time. He saw this when, traveling languidly, he reached the showgrounds on Jackson Street. No interlopers disputed with his gang for possession of the spot. Undisturbed, its present custodians were congenially engaged. The tumbled sawdust lay deep in the three rings; swatches of stained and odorous straw identified the lines where the zoological exhibits had been ranged, and the earth all thereabouts was starred with stake-holes and striped with tire-ruts. Under a baking sun the sluggish air still carried lingering savors of the circus smell, which is a fine conglomerate smell and once smelled not to be forgotten. By the aid of these physical reminders it was possible easily to re-create mental photographs of yesterday's more outstanding spectacles. Those present went further than this; they acted them out.

A boy named Leander Geason tripped across the pocked terrain and mounted a supposititious dais where the elevated stage had been. Swaying gently to and fro and skittering on his feet, he favored himself and any who might care to linger close by with the refrain of a duet song-and-dance number

which his apt memory had registered when it was being rendered as a leading feature of the great special concert or after-show. His head was thrown back while the harmonies lilted from him:

"Ain't we the cheese?  
 Oh, ain't we the cheese  
 As we glide gracefully a-mong the trees?  
 Tipping hat, twirling cane—  
 Ah, who can blame  
 The ladies—for saying—that we are the cheese?"

One look at the soloist's face would have sketched for you the inevitable sequel of this boy's future. In time to come he would belong either to a choir or a chorus; it depended only on how the twig was bent.

Juney, crossing the scored-in wheel furrows of the outer arena, regarded the vocalist with a bilious eye. Nor could he, in his present state, find favor for the ambitious presentation which went on at the ring just beyond. Herein, Earwigs Erwin presided as ringmaster, cracking the snapper of an invisible whip and at each crack crying out: "Houp la!" Behind him, mimicking his stately postures, cavorted Bubber Ferguson. It was apparent that Bubber Ferguson impersonated the principal producing clown, with imitations and specialties. It equally was plain to see what Buster Bernstein was, even though he officiated in a doubling capacity. One instant he was a pampered circus horse, curvetting at a weaving and measured gallop—you somehow knew that this was a large cream-colored horse, with flowing tawny mane and tail and dappled on

## THE SURPRISED PARTY

the flanks; the next he was the dashing premier equestrian who rode on that horse's bare and dimpled back, his arms folded and his supple body rhythmically in accord with the pace of his steed. Anon he leaped through an imaginary paper hoop held on just the proper slant by Bubber Ferguson. Anon he shouted "Alley up!" and crouching then, received and balanced on his capable shoulders a second spangled athlete who came somersaulting through space to alight there. His pantomime was most convincing; you could half shut your lids and almost see the less important gymnast whirling through space to connect with the moving human perch. Anon he was again the above horse.

The late arrival gave to this dual characterization no more than a somber glance. There was so much noise, so much of teetotuming hither and yon in tipsy evolutions, so great a waste of perspiration and energy! He felt a distaste for all these needless strivings. He drew no nearer to the main efforts; they seemed so laboriously futile. He went and slumped down on the earthen ring-back of the remote third ring. He was strongly tempted, so soon as he felt more inclined for walking, to return home. These vain activities annoyed him so! It was strange to think they ever had prospective allurements for him.

He became cognizant of some person who came upon him from the rear. The individual ranged alongside, grunted a brief greeting and took a seat close by. It was Clarence Lacey; it was Butch Lacey, though, everywhere excepting at home.

Juney might be cutting a fairly dolorous figure. But Butch Lacey cut a darker one. He was the walking embodiment of depression. His very manner of hunkering down said "Look upon me, I am betrothed to woe—the spouse and mate of a cankering grief."

He scooped up a handful of gritty sawdust and let it sift idly through his fingers.

"Whut's the reason you ain't playin' circus with the rest of 'em yonder?" he asked, listlessly.

"Too daggone hot—might git sunstroke," answered Juney.

His words belied his statement. The heat waves danced before him and there was no shelter above him where he sat, and his shadow was a coagulated black pool, like spilt ink that had run down the sides of a squat bottle.

Butch Lacey shrugged his shoulders. "Why don't you ask me why I ain't playin', neither?" he said, in the manner of one seeking opportunity to bare some private bereavement.

"Whut do I keer about you?" said Juney, morosely.

"Well, the reason I ain't is because they don't want me," went on Butch, determined to make his admissions, whether or no. "They kep' shovin' me out of the way ever' time I tried to do anythin'. They kep' sayin' all the things I did was out of fashion."

He fetched a soughing, long-drawn sigh. Job and Jeremiah; they both were in it. After a short pause he essayed again.



## THE SURPRISED PARTY

"That was a mighty funny old clown I saw right here," he stated, with the air now of a person who would summon up the effigy of at least one treasured pleasantry out of an otherwise barren and dismal past. "Johnny Lolo his name was. He stood right acros't there and he sung 'Over the Garden Wall.' He——"

"Whut you talkin' about?" demanded Juney. "There wasn't any clown singin'. You couldn't 'a' heard him ef he had; the tent was too big. Why, one time there must 'a' been mighty near thirty or forty clowns, all cuttin' up their didoes all at once. Yes, you better say mighty near fifty or a hund'ed of 'em. I almost got cross-eyed tryin' to look ever' place at once. And that there clown brass band that was marchin' 'round playin' a crazy tune and the one that was dressed up like a woman and kep' losin' his underclothes—gee, I like to died!"

"Well," persisted the mournful Butch, "that old Johnny Lolo was awful comical—ever'thing he did. I don't ever 'spect to see a much funnier clown than whut he was, not with the John Robinson shows, anyhow. And I remember that other time when Sells Brothers' came—or maybe it was Adam Forepaugh's?—anyhow, I was settin' right over there and——"

"Say, lissen." Juney was getting irritated and showed it. "Whut's the good of talkin' and talkin' and talkin' about the John Robinson show and draggin' in those other shows when a whole lot bigger and better one, like Barnum & Bailey's, has just been here? How many elephunts did John

Robinson's have last year? Four, that's all! And how many did Barnum's have yistiddy? Twelve, 'cause I counted 'em and I reckon I ought to know."

"But the John Robin——"

"Say, I ain't feelin' very well. You want to make me plum' sick at my stomach? If you want to talk about a circus whut's the matter with talkin' about that one yistiddy? Wasn't it The Greatest Show on Earth, just like the 'nouncements said?"

"I don't know ef it was or ef it wasn't."

"Whut's the reason you don't know? Got eyes in your head, ain't you?"

Sorrow's bridegroom raised his face. "I wasn't here," he confessed bleakly.

"Wasn't here? How come you wasn't here?"

"My father wouldn't let me, that's why."

"Gee!" said Juney. The other's malfeasances must indeed have been of a great enormity. "What'd you been doin' fur him not to let you come?"

"Nothin' a-tall. That wasn't why he wouldn't let me."

"Well, then, who's been sick or dead up at your house?"

"Nobody." Suddenly the smouldering light in his eyes was fanned to a flame. "That dag-gone old preacher!" He delivered this last as a curse.

"Say," snarled Juney, "whut you sittin' here mumblin' about now? Whut's a preacher got to do with P. T. Barnum's circus, I'd like to know?"

"Well, you know the Rev'n'. Hemingway is the minister at our church, don't you?"

“ ’Course I do. Wasn’t you and me both along that day last fall when we egged on and sicked on Bubber Ferguson while he licked that sneaky four-eyed kid of his? Whut’s that old preacher got to do with your not bein’ here yistiddy?”

“Ever’ting. He went and preached last Sunday mornin’ ag’inste circuses. Said they were sinks of vileness. Said they were traps to ketch decent people and drag ’em down into sin. I heard him—my mother made me stay after Sunday school fur church. Took and pointed out of the church door at those bill-boards that’re acros’t the street and said it was a crime that there had to be pictures of shameless women with not enough clothes on ’em lookin’ right into a church. Said circuses oughten’ to be allowed—a whole lot more like that. And my father he believes that ever’ting the Rev’n’. Hemingway says is just the gospel truth. So he wouldn’t take me to the circus yistiddy. He watched me, too, so I couldn’t slip out and go by myself—I had the money fur a ticket—or go with anybody else. I even had to see the grand free street parade on the sly.”

“Gee gosh!” It was an exclamation which Juney saved up for occasions calling for the expression of tremendous emotions. He had felt no deep degree of commiseration for the Lacey boy on learning, just now, that the latter had not patronized the circus. With boys, sympathy is as charity should be, so we are told, with all of us—begins at home and generally it stays there. Any time a boy wishes to pity somebody he can furnish his own raw ma-

terials. Besides, there was mental sustenance to be extracted from gloating over another boy who had not been present. But the hideous thing which this officious preacher had done—that was a blow at the very citadel of the rights of boyhood! It made the perpetrator an enemy to the whole race.

“Well, whut you goin’ do about it?” he asked.

“What kin I do—ain’t he our minister?”

“Well, anyhow, I guess you could lay fur that little old Specks Hemingway and make him hard to ketch.”

Butch shook his bent poll. “I been thinking some about that,” he said; “but it’s his old daddy I’d like to git even with the most. Him standin’ up there in a pulpit wavin’ his arms and shootin’ off his mouth and keepin’ me frum goin’ to the circus. And now he’s fixin’ to have a s’prise party given to him this very evenin’ at ha’f past four o’clock!”

“Whut’s a s’prise party?” inquired Juney. The phrase awakened a beclouded memory. He had heard it somewhere before, but for the moment the definition eluded him.

“Why, he’ll be settin’ there all dressed up at his house—him and Mizz Hemingway and that kid of his, too, I reckon—and then purty soon ever’body that belong to the congregation comes walkin’ in bringin’ ’em donations—stuff to eat and clothes and all like that. But they have to be makin’ out like they aint lookin’ fur company or ’spectin’ anything to happen. That’s whut a s’prise party is.”

## THE SURPRISED PARTY

"Makin' out like? Do they know beforehand that all those people are comin'?"

"'Course they know it. Popper said at dinner-time today to mommer that it wouldn't be a reg'lar s'prise party without you knew about it about two weeks ahead so's you could git all fixed up fur it and git in practice actin' s'prised. Packin' that old Rev'n'. Hemingway good things to eat! I wisht somebody would bring 'em somethin' that would make him sick as a dawg. I wisht he'd have to stay sick a whole month."

The game of wishing evil upon the Hemingway household appealed to Juney. He took a hand in it: "I wisht somebody would take and hold his nose fur him and make him swaller down a whole plug of this here Cup Greenville——" he broke off, gagging slightly. "Well, anyway, I wisht he had the yellow janders or the mumps or somethin'."

"Or the small-pox," suggested Butch, his doleful spirits reviving at the idea of plaguing ailments for his clerical foe. "I reckon it would be best of all ef he had the small-pox 'cause then I know, good and well, there wouldn't nobody be takin' him presents this evenin'. Instid of that, they'd be breakin' their necks to stay away frum him like ever'body did frum around the pesthouse out back of Eden's Hill last spring when we had the small-pox ep'demic, and all the people in this town was skeered mighty near to death. Remember, Juney?"

"I sh'd say!"

Juney said this, but seemed scarcely to be aware he was saying it. The languor of his convalescence

was lifting and dissolving from him as though a tonic wind carded away the last shreds of a fog. He stood up and the blot of his shadow trickled out into an elongated and forked scrawl. He looked into space, his lips moving. Thus Columbus must have looked, one fancies, and Balboa and all those other born discoverers.

The moving lips produced words: "We'll have to find Earl Lake somewheres, first," they were saying. "He ain't here. It's funny he ain't here. But I reckon I know where I kin find him without much bother. His house is on the way we'll be goin', anyhow." Juney looked reflectively toward the disporting actors in the next ring, then made a decision: "No, I reckon we better not let those fool kids go; there'd be too many of them, and if we have a whole mob along somebody would be sure to start sniggerin' and maybe give the whole thing away. Just me and you and Earl Lake will be plenty."

"But where 're you fixin' fur us to go to, Juney?" asked Butch. "And whut makes you think you need Earl Lake along?"

Juney, intently weaving his web, disregarded the first question; to the second he gave a cryptic answer: "We got to have Earl Lake; anyhow, we got to git into his house. His father used to be the county health officer—still is, I reckon. The things that was left over frum that time must still be up in the attic. They were there two—three—weeks ago when a crowd of us were up there playin'."



"Whose attic? Whut things?"

"Earl Lake's father's attic, of course." He spoke shortly; these interruptions evidently annoyed him.

"But whut things?"

"The flags and the signs and all. Say, lemme 'lone a minute, won't you? Don't you see how busy I am, thinkin'?" Aloud, he continued his speculations: "Natchelly we don't want nobody spyin' on me while I'm up there on the roof. Well, that ain't goin' to be so very hard. It's lucky the house is the way it is."

"Whose house—Earl's?"

"Aw, shut up! . . . I remember one time last year me and Wiggy Erwin climbed up in the steeple to hook some pairs of young pigeons out of the nests that are up there; and when we was startin' down we saw how a feller could climb down off the main roof onto the roof of the Sunday School room and frum there hop down onto the roof of the kitchen, because they're mighty near touchin'. And so afterwards I kin climb back the same way and come on down the steps frum the steeple. All I got to do is pick a time when there ain't nobody goin' past. Well, that needn't be much trouble. The street ends just a little way down on the other side; 'tain't like as ef it was a street that run all the way through, like Locust or Walnut; and so natchelly not many people go by. There's only one house next door and that's away over clean on the other side and nobody lives there but old Mrs. Plowden. And acros't on the other side it's

only that vacant lot and all those billboards and no houses a-tall."

"But you ain't even said whut steeple and all you mean?"

Petulantly, as a horse flinches its hide to shake off flies, Juney shrugged at his listener for silence. The ground plan was platted and plotted. He consolidated the outlying strands of his fabric:

"And those billboards will make a mighty good place fur us to hide behind 'em and keep a watch-out. We'll only have to watch in one direction, too. And when people come along that look like they're goin' there—they'll be carryin' bundles and things, so that's how we'll know 'em—we'll just step out and stop 'em. No, I reckon we better stop ever'body that comes along; that'll be the best. And we'll say to 'em, we'll say——" He checked to frame his speech, then rehearsed it: "We'll say somethin' like this: 'Yessuh, we don't know fur sure yit, but we think prob'ly it must be the whole fambly. . . . Nome, we don't know which one of 'em got taken down with it first, because of course nobody kin go in there now to see 'em. It must of broke out all of a sudden, sometime today. . . . Yessum, they're still there. They haven't come to take 'em away yit, and after that prob'ly they'll make ever'body stay out of the neighborhood till after they've fume—fume—fumilated the neighborhood.'"

He turned to the thwarted Butch: "I'll teach you whut to say. You two kids just lissen at me the first time while I'm sayin' it and then you'll

know how. But all along I 'spect you'd better let me do most of the talkin'."

"Talkin' 'bout whut? I don't even know yit whut *you're* talkin' about, Juney."

"Well, why ain't you been payin' a little 'tention, then? I 'spose you want me to go all through the whole thing ag'in. Here, git this into your old mind: You said, didn't you, just a little while ago, that that there old preacher of yours was goin' to have a s'prise party this evenin'? Well, he's goin' to have one all right but it ain't goin' to be a lot of church people that'll give it to him. No suhree-bob!"

"Well, then, who is goin' to give it to him, ef they ain't?"

"Just you and me and Earl Lake—lunkhead!"

Sultry hours have passed. The hour is six forty-five. One of those gentle little breezes that come in the cool of the evening—when, in this climate, there is any cool of the evening—is trying to spring up. From the open front door of his parsonage, where it nestles under the overhang of his church, there emerges the Rev. Mr. Hemingway. He wears the costume reserved by him for great days and holy days—the flowing black alpaca coat, the stately high collar, shorn away in front to give the Adam's apple freer play before the world, the narrow string tie of white lawn. He is accompanied by Mrs. Hemingway and their orderly son, Master Hemingway, both of these also being attired as for some fête. His cast of countenance betokens a

great bewilderment, a great vexation. Their faces, too, are perturbed.

A stride in advance of them, the husband and father paces the walk leading to and from his front gate. As he walks he speaks. It is in his best ministerial voice that he speaks. Indeed, scoffing persons of other faiths than his have gone so far as to claim that he has no other speaking voice than this. It is as though he addressed a vast concourse, instead of an attentive audience of but two. He speaks as follows:

"I am chagrined, I am pained, I am distressed—nay more, I am shocked. I state it without reservation or equivocation, that I am shocked. My wound is very sore and I know not where to seek for balm. From sources deemed by me to be authoritative, a friendly whispered intimation comes that upon this very day, at a given hour the members of my fold contemplate a descent in force upon this, our simple cottage home, bearing with them praiseworthy gifts and thank-offerings. I insist that I cannot have fallen into error regarding the date or the time. To make such mistakes is a thing entirely foreign to my nature.

"So the shepherd makes ready to greet his flock. Our household is made ready; we don our gala apparel; the cot is swept and garnished. A light collation—lemonade, iced tea and drop cakes, to enumerate—is prepared by this dear good woman here. I myself prepare remarks suitable for the gathering in of such a multitude—an invocation for blessings from on high to be delivered when

all have convened, then a few well-chosen words of welcome. The prospect is beautiful, yea, I say it is very very beautiful, very touching.

"And what happens? Beloved ones, I ask you what happens? The appointed hour draws nigh. I station myself at yon lintel, ready with smiles and hearty handclasp to bid all and sundry enter in and be of good cheer. My wife here bustles to and fro, intent on her housewifely offices. My son stations himself in our front window. Time passes. And no one comes.

"And no one comes!

"We continue to wait, summing up such patience as we may. And still we behold no affectionate face of some devoted brother or sister, beaming upon us; still we see no familiar form approaching with eager step. This peaceful thoroughfare is untraversed, in fact, well-nigh deserted. But few individuals appear—and they practically are strangers who pass with hurried step upon the opposite side of the way. The dragging minutes go by; they grow into an hour, into two hours, into more than two hours. And still we are unvisited. It is as though of a sudden, this had become a place shunned, neglected, proscribed, banned, accursed.

"I do not understand it. With disappointment and sorrow in my heart, I await an explanation. There is no explanation. A proper sense of dignity requires that I shall not venture forth to seek for causes and reasons, nor can I in propriety delegate such a task to this, my child, least of all to my trusted helpmate, the wife of my bosom. Had

we a telephone, as had been promised us, but not yet installed owing to I know not what delay, I might have recourse to that convenient instrument, now attaining a justified vogue in our thriving and progressive little city, in order to make discreet inquiry in some responsible quarter. But there is no telephone. It was, as I have just said, promised. But it is not installed.

"So we are rendered, as it were, dumb prisoners. Again I say I am pained and I am perplexed. Again I repeat that I do not understand it!"

He turns about so that he faces his domicile. He had reached the gate and is about to start the return half of his fifth round-trip. As though seeking in the skies the answer to his grievous puzzle, he raises his head, stretching forth both arms, then freezes there, his eyes goggling.

From his gable, rippling softly, depends a large flag of that saffron shade which, the world over, advertises the pestilence and proclaims the quarantine. It is the centre-piece for a decorative frieze which follows the angled line of the eaves—a frieze composed of square placards, of the same warning color as the flag. And upon each of these placards, in large plain black letters, is printed a single word: "SMALLPOX."



## *Chapter XXVII*

### CUPID FINGERING HIS BOW

NEITHER then nor afterwards did it occur to Juney Custer that the significant events took place, all of them, in the compass of a single day. It never even occurred to him that they might have been significant. Least of all did he see any kinship between them or among them. He was accustomed to take things as they came along. And usually they came along on their own steam, so to speak, without deliberation or prior connivance on his part. Life was built up of unpremeditated changes; that was what helped to give zest and tingle to it. That he should make group classifications of separate happenings, stringing them together, like tokens on a bangle, as cumulative reminders of a yet greater change, was no part of his adolescent regime. His system was without any system; his philosophy taught him to squeeze the last possible drop of juice from a pleasure, to extricate as quickly as might be out of a difficulty or a dilemma. It did not teach him to frame hypothetical summaries or draw mathematical conclusions. The annalist trusts he has made it plain in these preceding chapters that Juney Custer neither

was an abnormality nor an exotic, but merely an average boy in average surroundings.

The pregnant day began for him when his father, rising from breakfast to go downtown and take up business cares, said across the table to his mother:

"Well, I guess this young customer here has paid the price for his latest piece of freshness. . . . Yes, I know I told him, when I found out that trick he'd played on Parson Hemingway, that he had to stay in the yard for two weeks. But I guess one week is enough—considering. Let him loose this morning. But mind you, young man"—he pivoted on the disciplined party—"I don't want to hear any more bad reports of you for a spell, anyhow. If I give you this chance do you think you can behave yourself and leave other people's surprise parties be?" Under his mustache the corners of his mouth twitched.

With a more or less successful effort to bear himself as one chastened and purged, Juney gave his pledge; and shortly after his father's departure he made an advent into freedom via the alley gate. He did not know exactly where he was going or what he would be doing for the next few hours, nor did he particularly care—during his term of purification he rather has lost touch with current issues. The main point was that he was absolved and could go whither he listed.

One detail, only, was certain: For a somewhat later part of the forenoon, doings of a processional character were scheduled. He purposed to view

these. So his mind, for the instant, dwelt reviewingly upon the general subject of public pagentry. Less than a fortnight had elapsed since he with enthusiasm viewed that most notable street parade—Barnum & Bailey's, no less. Today's affair he might enjoy as spectacle but his principles forbade that he should applaud it. By the further association of ideas his thoughts traveled on back to yet more distant turnouts. There had been the excitements of comparatively recent campaigns. Again he saw his father advancing toward him in the front formation of a serried phalanx and wearing a tall white plug hat—Juney subsequently had fallen heir to that plug hat—and carrying a new broom on his shoulder and chanting at intervals: "Sweep the rascals out!" Again he saw his Uncle Paul—but this picture was a night-time picture—swinging past, a red oil-cloth cape over his shoulders, a tin helmet on his head and in his hands, carried like a lance, a gasoline torch with a mouthpiece fixed in its handle. And when the grand marshal gave the command: "Blow, flambeaux, blow!" the nodding, dancing buds of flame all hissed out and up into tall jets and gushes, and by their light the copings of nearby buildings sprang forth in stippled relief and the upper windows turned rosy bright as though the buildings were on fire within; and the flanges of the helmets and the bulges of the slick red capes were foiled with blazing dots and dashes. And, finally, there was the time, away back yonder, when there had been a special slogan for the marchers: "Burn, burn, burn this letter!" and Juney himself had

voiced the doctrine that was strong within his then diminutive person by the frequent repetition of a certain quatrain. All of a sudden now he remembered it and it seemed fitting that once more he should sing it; which he did:

"Jim Blaine is the waggin,  
Black Jack is the hoss,  
Hendricks is the driver—  
And Cleveland is the boss!"

"Huh, boy, you's late," said a railing voice right alongside him. Slightly startled, he looked about. Acy Gholson, the odd-jobs man of the Custer establishment, was grinning at him out of a window of the stable. Acy had a curry-comb in one hand and a smouldering corn-cob pipe of an exceeding great fragranciness in the other. A second head bobbed up alongside Acy's where it was cased in the square framing—a somewhat smaller head than Acy's, but dark and wooly, as his was. It appertained to Archibald, nephew to Aunt Mallie.

"Yas, suh," said Acy. "Trouble wid you chronic Dimmercrats is, you's always too early wid yore jubilatin', else you's too late. I 'members w'en de onliest way you could ratify wuz befo' de 'lection, 'cause de day after wuz yore hour of sorrow. Well, dem times done come back. Glory hallelujah to my soul, dey gwine keep on comin' back.!"

"Huh, you needn't think you are so smart—old Black Radicals!" sneered Juney. The tag of his retort was designed not as a slur for Voter Ghol-

son's skin pigmentation, but referred to the principles of that citizen's political sponsors.

"Tha's right, go ahead," chortled the jobmaster; "better call 'em Linkinites and Ab'litionists, too, whilst you's about it. I knows who you is quotin' after; dat grandmaw of your'n suttin'ly is a mouty onfurgivin' ole w'te lady. Naw, suh, hard names don't hurt us Republikins none when Freedom is done come to stay. Fust dey 'mancipated de niggers. Now dem new 'lectric trolley-cars 'at dey got in dis town done 'mancipate' de mules." He whooped over his joke then, adroitly, turned the dialogue into safer grounds. Acy was a stalwart, but partisan discussions only led to ill-feelings. "Lawtsy, boy," he commented admiringly, "you suttin'ly is fin'ly done decided to start in shootin' up in de air, ain't it so? Turn my haid to spit, yere lately, an' look back ag'in an' seem lak in de meantime you is done growed 'nother ha'f inch in both directions. You keep on dis way, 'twont be so long 'fore we'll haf' call you Young Boss, fur to 'stinguish you frum de ole reg'lar boss-man."

He laughed at his conceit and Juney, over his shoulder, winked up at Acy. Only a few days before, they had been "prizing" down at the warehouse and he was there, skylarking about; and while the loosened hoops and staves of the hogsheads fell clattering and the air was filled with the clamor of hammers and the singing of the floorcrews and with the freed smell of tons upon tons of the compressed brown leaf, the black foreman

had yelled at him: "Hey, Little Cap'n, git out of de way!" His father was Big Cap'n, of course.

Little Cap'n, first and pretty soon now, by the prophecy of this household seer, he would be the Young Boss! He reared back and was cocksure as he moved down the alley.

"Say, Juney," Archibald called after him, "does you mind ef I goes wid you a lil' ways?"

"Stay yere, chile," said Acy, reprovingly; "stay yere wid yore own cullur."

There was a wistful yet a reconciled look in Archibald's eyes as he ducked down out of the window. The day had been, and not so very long before, when Archibald would not have sued for permission to accompany Juney; as a matter of course he would have gone along with him. This pair often had played together, had fought and striven together on equal terms and the one who excelled took the credit for it. But within the past six months or so, by a sort of mutual unspoken understanding, they had been drawing farther and farther apart. Nobody, in so many words, had told either that the hour of their cleavage had struck. Without being told, somehow they both had known it and both had accepted it. This did not mean they would cease to be friends; it meant merely they would be friends in a less familiar fashion, with an invisible but unbreachable wall between them. In time to come, Archibald might shave Juney or might wait on him at table, might sweep out his store or his office for him, if so be there was any store or any office to be swept out.

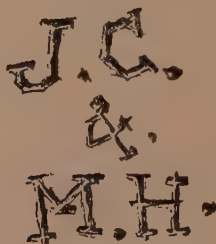


And almost certainly he would beg Juney's second-best clothes away from him, possibly borrow small sums of money of him, inevitably would know a good many of his patron's secrets. But Juney never would know Archibald's; Archibald belonged to the race which is all the more inscrutable and secretive for seeming outwardly to be not in the least so.

Near the mouth of the alley, Juney saw a red-headed woodpecker hammering with vigor at the tin cornice of an outbuilding in the Edgar yard. Nesting cares were over; the woodpecker was a snare-drummer in a piebald uniform and a jaunty crimson cockade. In the gravel underfooting the boy found a good "sailin'-rock" and sped it at the mark. The debonair bird flirted aside—not that it was in any real peril—and its tricky loping flight carried it away. From behind the intervening fence there arose a sharp jingling crackle, as of breaking glass. Old Mr. Edgar had a hot-house where he grew flowers and early garden truck. Also, possibly by reason of heavy bills for reglazing, he had a living feud with all stone-throwing boys.

Juney bent low and scudded out of that venue. He did not abate his canter until he had put a considerable distance between him and it. Then, first glancing about him to make sure he was unobserved, he drew from his pocket a formerly double-bladed knife, opened the one blade remaining and on the smooth bark of a water maple at the edge of the roadway he carved the design of a plump

heart with two sets of initials coupled within it.  
Like this:



He stood off and admired the creation—the pattern of it and its sweetly sentimental implication. He would be overcome with blushes when persons of his acquaintance discovered this work and gibed him about it, as most surely they would, but privately he would be tremendously tickled, too. If charged with inscribing it he hotly would deny the soft impeachment—still, he desired to be so accused, desired also that his bashful repudiation be not credited. Which was why he had chosen the most conspicuous shade-tree upon a populous sidewalk, a favorite trysting-place of lovers, for his blazonry.

At the gentler passion Juney was a novice and most inexperienced in its wiles. As its devotee he had indeed much to learn; the prospect of learning daunted and yet allured him. His sweethearting impulses had been conceived in travail. Their labored accouchement dated from that fateful Friday afternoon, a matter of three months before, when, having skidded along a Via Dolorosa into

a Slough of Despond, he had for a condign offence been condemned to don a girl's sunbonnet, the property of one Milly Hollander. By rights, it would seem that because of this he thereafter should hate this Milly Hollander, who not only was an enthralled witness to his humiliation but had, in a way of speaking, been an accomplice to it. Strangely enough, the outcome had been different. It was as though wearing her preposterous head-gear under duress was a beginning of suitorship; as though that sunbonnet of hers was to make a common bond between them.

Even so, his love stole upon him unawares. One later day he had been practicing the deaf-and-dumb language—not the awkward two-handed code but the smarter sort by which, with swift play of the fingers of one hand, silent communication might be carried on with a fellow-adept. He had memorized this better method from a thumbed chart card which was included among Clabbor Hewlett's most valued chattels, it having been part and parcel of that same packet of literary treasures which—as the reader may recall—Clabbor Hewlett had aforetime purchased at the incredibly low cost of one dime of a philanthropic merchantile house in New England. All at once he found himself spelling the letters of Milly's name. Why, he could not say. Another day soon thereafter, in an effort to relieve the tedium of a grammar lesson, he was playing a surreptitious game of *Tit-tat-toe* under cover of his desk-top—his right hand arraigned against his left—when without conscious intent he

began writing out her name on his slate, over and over again. Then, on the very last day of school she signally had honored him—had asked him to fill a page in her plush autograph book. The promptings of his soul bade him make at least a pseudo-avowal but native caution and diffidence and fear of ridicule stayed him. He fell back upon a non-committal formula: "You ask me to Write in your Album I hardly know how to Begin for there's Nothing original in me except original Sin."

And she, the adept little flatterer, had pretended a pleased surprise at his knack of versifying, and behaved as though she had not heard this stilted propriety a thousand times before. In age she was younger than Juney by perhaps a year but in affairs of the heart almost old enough to be his mother. She knew how to deal with them—how surely she knew! Coquetry was hers, not as an acquirement but as a birthright.

Thereafter, when opportunity served, he haunted the vicinities where she was likely to be, skirting like a vagrant comet on the outskirts of her personal firmament, seeming to ignore her presence but constantly showing off for her benefit. Until now he had only contempt for those members of his own sex who openly courted the objects of their favor. To him it had seemed that any squire of dames must be a weakling, enervated and softened by an unnatural languishing. But lately his contempt had turned to a carking envy. He wished he had the little tricks of gallantry which those emotionalists possessed.

Well, at least he had made a start. Here, scored deep in this firm trunk was his first quasi-public confession. He studied it. It seemed to lack something—the featly touch which distinguishes interpretative artistry from mere manual dexterity. So he cut in the design of an armorial arrow transfixing the graven heart—an arrow well-fletched at the butt, well-barbed at the tip, with three small pendent gouges to denote drops of blood. He put his knife away then and resumed his random journeyings. Somebody soon would be sure to see the engraving and taunt him with its authorship, and he had a yearning, part desire, part dread, to hear his name bracketed with Milly Hollander's. He must ape the conventional indifference to it, but inside him he vastly would be pleased.

Almost immediately the artificer had his wish. He came to a vacant lot where four friends of his were playing a spirited game of *Sow in the Mushroom*. At sight of him they left off to unite in a teasing refrain:

“Juney’s sad  
And we are glad,  
And we know whut’ll please him:  
A bottle of wine  
To make him shine,  
And Milly Hollander to squeeze him!”

“Aw, shuckins,” he answered, “you kids make me tired! Whyn’t you think up somethin’ new onc’t in a while?” But to himself he smiled inwardly. He was all aglow with romance.

From a rubbish heap in the weeds he unearthed

a proper staff—the handle of a worn-out broom—and joined in the sport. As the latest comer the rules required that he be “It,” and so, by fencing nudges and strokes, to shepherd a battered tin can into a central hole in the earth, overcoming the circled attacks of the rest who strove with sweeps or jabs to drive the “sow” out of bounds and yet each retain individual possession of his own hole, standing guard against the common foe, as well as against treachery from other defenders. It was a sport which required that a player have eyes at the back of his head. Juney seemed to have extra eyes there. He had stolen a hole left for an instant ungarrisoned and Freddie McGowan was “It”; and Juney, with aid from the others, was making life a burden for this boy when, thinly and from far off, they heard martial music. The parade must be coming; so they all dropped their cudgels and went hot-foot to meet it. But nobody was gladder to go than Freddie McGowan was.



## *Chapter XXVIII*

### 'TWAS IN TOMATO TIME

**T**HERE could be no doubt about it, Mr. Al Martine was an optimist—the original Mr. Al Martine, that is, sole proprietor of Al Martine's Mastodonic Uncle Tom's Cabin Company, traveling on its own private cars, two in number, summer dates under canvas, winter dates in halls. As for that, all managers and owners of perambulating theatrical enterprises must have a constant sunshine in their souls. Beyond the lowering financial clouds which may dim the present, they must be able to discern the silver-lined rifts; else would they be seeking out more stable fields of endeavor. But Mr. Al Martine, a nobby dresser on and off, playing the silver cornet in his own band, which he led, and able on a moment's notice to understudy any part in his presentations—always excluding the parts of Little Eva, Topsy, Miss Ophelia and Eliza—was more sanguine even than the generality of his clan. Observe how sanguine he was:

He knew the Bloody Chasm was bridged over; that the ancient Boundary was now a genteel sash of honor stretched on the bosom of a reunited country. He had read statements to that effect in

the papers, had heard promulgation of the gratifying fact from the lips of orators. Sectionalism was dying out—so he reliably had been informed. It must be good and dead, then, in the areas lying just below the border. Thus Mr. Al Martine reasoned. So when he found competition keen in the familiar reaches of Michigan and Indiana and keener still after he wildcatted down and across into Lower Illinois, he decided on a daring step. As a pioneer he would open up the virginal territory lying below and adjacent to the Ohio. Into the Farther South he would not venture yet; there he must allow for the healing ointments of time to soften the last scabby sores of reconstruction. But certainly he might with pleasure and profit skirt its edge, charting out a route for future exploitations and building up a reputation and a clientele against fat years to come. We must admire the pluck which actuates our pathfinders but sometimes we may deplore their lack of judgment. Mr. Al Martine might better have done as I sometimes think all amateur Arctic explorers should do—send the relief party on ahead to establish the rescue camps and get all settled down and cosy and comfortable, there to await the arrival of the expedition proper.

This, then, promised to be a great day for Mr. Martine and for his troupe. For it was the day which marked the launching of his campaign of infiltration. It had set in auspiciously. It was progressing without hindrance or signs of hostility on the part of the populace. There had been no

great pothor or delay about procuring a license; unmolested, his advance agent had circulated the advertising matter. The start-off of his street parade had been in the nature of a triumph; at each forward step into and on through the colored quarter, the proofs of a cordial approval from the inhabited yards and burdened front fences of small cottages along the line of march had warmed his heart cockles. Certainly these good people were welcoming the friendly invaders. And a black man's half dollar was just as good as anybody's half dollar, wasn't it?

The caravan had moved on into the main residential district; it now was penetrating the business centre—the uniformed band in front; Little Eva, with her flaxen curls, in a chariot drawn by two Shetland ponies; Marks, the white-spatted Lawyer, in his donkey-cart; the Genuine Siberian Blood Hound, traveling under leash and muzzle; and, sitting at the door of a property log-house mounted on wheels, good old Uncle Tom in white wig and burnt cork. The visible citizenry looked on with seeming placid interest. A Northern-born American probably would have been incredulous had you told him that among these silent watchers from store doors and house windows and awning posts, not one in twenty ever before had seen epitomized in the flesh any single one of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's brain-children; that not one in ten ever had read the classic work upon which the dramatic version was based. One decade later, or, to be on the safer side, say two decades

later, there might be a different story to tell in these parts. But Mr. Martine was ahead of his times. How was he to know—and he a native son of Scranton, Pa.?—that here stood a town which still remembered it once had borne—and had been proud to bear—the name of Little Charleston? There were ever so many things about public feeling in this community—its prejudices and its taboos—which Mr. Al Martine did not know. His ambition—or was it his ignorance?—made blinkers for his eyes.

Mark a second mistake on his part, a mistake not of the heart but of the head: Very appropriately the band of which he was the director and the most shining ornament, had been favoring the attentive throngs with a medley of Southern Airs—Dixie first, then My Old Kentucky Home, Suwanee River, Arkansaw Traveler, Maryland My Maryland, Carry Me Back to Old Virginny. As his fingers flitted upon the keys of his cornet, Mr. Martine searched his mind for still another typically Southern air—one which, by subtle indirection, might pay graceful homage to some sister commonwealth as yet uncomplimented. Ah, he had it. He gave a signal and at that there blared forth the opening strains of Marching Through Georgia!

Standing on the sidewalk in front of Boyd & Wash's saloon, old Colonel Powhattan Beck, late of the Orphan Brigade and still, after the passage of twenty-odd years, entirely unreconciled to the outcome of various negotiations which had taken place under a small apple tree at Appomattox, Va., gave

a tremendous snort. His white goatee suddenly bristled out from his long lean chin like a burgee in a fair breeze. He snatched off his black slouch hat—the Colonel wore a black slouch hat even in August, when practically everybody else was under a straw thatching—and cast it on the earth, and made as though to advance, single-handed, upon the approaching bandleader. Had Mr. Martine flung a sidewise glance he might have been pardoned for assuming that an elderly gentleman had desire to halt and congratulate him upon his happy choice of State songs. But certain of the bystanders labored under no such illusions. Three or four of them blocked off the impetuous old soldier. They entreated him to remain calm. “Don’t be starting any to-do now, Colonel,” pleaded one. “That’s right, Colonel, you’ll spoil everything,” said a second; “just wait——”

“You ask me to wait, when these infernal scoundrels are actually daring to perpetrate that—that—insult—right here on our principal street?” sputtered Colonel Beck. “You expect me to endure that? Why, by Heavens, gentlemen——!” Language failed him; apoplexy seemed to threaten him. He ceased to struggle. He suffered himself to be drawn into Boyd & Wash’s. As he vanished through the swinging-doors he was heard to make reference to the camel’s brittle back and to the final straw which had broken it. The bar-keeper within caught the words without getting the application. He put two straws in a drink which speedily he mixed, and the Colonel, accepting the

tall glass with a clasp which trembled, continued to gurgle and snort passionately as he sucked up the soothing compound, so that the surface of his diminishing julep was speckled with a continuous rosary of small bubbles arising from the bottom.

Juney Custer had never heard the tune to which the venerable war-horse had taken exception; because of local aversions, it lay under embargo and ban. Its stirring martial notes beckoned to something in him, though. He sped along—he and the rest of his group—keeping blithe step to its uplifting measures. They had intercepted the parade as it turned into Franklin Street; they had not exactly meant to accompany it; but, after all, a street parade was a street parade.

An arm reached forth and a hand plucked Juney out from among his friends and held him while they passed on. It was his Uncle Paul who had detained him, and his Uncle Paul had an enigmatic smile on his face.

“Hold on there, kid,” he said, “don’t you know your grandmother would just naturally snatch you bald-headed if she caught you following that outfit yonder—to say nothing of what your mother might do to you in the line of a dressing-down?”

“I wasn’t followin’ ’em, honest I wasn’t,” said Juney. “I just sort of happened to be goin’ the same way.” He deemed it wise to express his true attitude; in part he quoted what he had heard from parental sources. “Old Yankees comin’ down here to act out a pack of lies and stir up race-rows and ever’thing—dag-gone ’em!”



"That being the case, I don't suppose you'd care to see the show this evening?" said his uncle.

"No, suh!" declared Juney, stoutly. He appeared to ponder, then spoke with less fervor: "Well, not unless popper 'd let me go—I reckon it wouldn't do any harm just to look on. Only, I know he wouldn't."

"Well, suppose I was going and I took you along with me—as my guest—what then?"

"Oh, gee! But popper might——"

"Never mind that. I'll take the responsibility," said Uncle Paul. "You needn't say anything about it at home . . . Here, wait a minute, though." He hailed a nearby adult: "Say, Breck, you're sort of running this shindig—how about letting this nephew of mine in on it, if I vouch for him?"

"Think he's big enough?" asked the other man, doubtfully.

"Of course he is. He's big enough to raise his share of Cain whenever he gets a chance—I'll say that much for him," stated his Uncle Paul. "And I bet he's got a better throwing arm right now than either one of us has got. He's the champion pitcher of his ball-team and they're the champions of Locust Street."

He addressed his kinsman: "Now, listen, kid. You're elected to go on our little picnic—probably there won't be any other boys of your age along, either. Reckon you can keep mum about it beforehand? . . . Good! If your daddy raises a fuss about it afterwards I'll take the blame—but I don't much think he will. You just slide out, quietly,

all by yourself, when you get through with your dinner and meet me at the side-door of S. K. Purdue's commission house. The side-door, remember? We load up and start from there. If you don't see me when you first get there and anybody tries to head you off, just you tell 'em who you are and say I'm going bond for you. But keep your mouth shut in the meanwhile. And whatever you do, don't bring any of your gang with you. Understand?"

And while Juney did not understand, he said he did.

Under a skimpy marquee the matinee was well along and going beautifully. To a reasonable extent—and Mr. Al Martine was very reasonable in this regard—the patronage was gratifying. His tarpaulin theatre might have held a larger audience than now it held; then again, there had been times when it had housed a much lesser number of paid admissions. The space at the rear, roped off for persons of color, was packed to the strangulation point and those who packed it had been most generous in their applause and more than enthusiastic in their comments. For awhile it had appeared as though the rows of camp chairs in the reserved seat section fronting the stage would be shy of tenants; only here and there was this area sprinkled with human shapes. But just before the curtain went up a considerable party of Caucasians—mainly recruited, if one might judge by their appearance, from the business and professional



THE PARADE NOW PENETRATED THE BUSINESS CENTER, WHERE THE VISIBLE CITIZENRY LOOKED ON WITH SEEMING PLACID INTEREST.



classes—had entered, practically in a body. To the promoter, counting up the house through a handy peep-hole in the back-drop, this influx of solid citizens augured finely. If the turnout for the afternoon was so satisfactory, how much better things might be expected for the night engagement. He bade his actor-staff put snap into it. They certainly did. Eliza never had crossed with better effect on the ice—dry-goods boxes covered with white cheese-cloth and studded about, at intervals convenient for skipping, on the surface of a blue cloth scalloped with painted waves to represent wintry waters. Nobody could claim the Siberian Blood Hound was being badly supported.

The scene was the scene where dear faithful old Tom and the despicable Legree hold the boards for one of the most moving episodes of the whole play. Well down stage, almost under the proscenium arch, the hapless bondsman was crouched. Above him flickered the cruel blacksnake of his grim taskmaster. For this occasion Mr. Martine was himself reading the lines assigned to the brute overseer. Shortly following parade, his regular Legree had succumbed to over-indulgence in those insidious but powerful beverages known hereabouts as sweet'nin' drams; too many long toddies temporarily had spoiled a first-rate villain. But the Uncle Tom was the official Uncle Tom.

The latter reached the point where he makes the historic reference of the tenor that, while the oppressor may do the very possible worst on his enslaved body, his soul nevertheless is the exclusive

property of God. He began the speech but fate had it that he, in this presence at least, should not conclude it. A lengthy gaunt man arose from his place in the front row of seats and gave a signal. And at that a plump squashy tomato—one of the softest and pulpiest tomatoes of the over-ripened store requisitioned from Mr. S. K. Purdue's produce-house—imprinted itself on the lowering Legree, right between his eyes. But the next tomato caught Uncle Tom full in the chest and painted there a drippy design of a red starfish.

And now the air was full of pelting fat tomatoes. There were a hundred of them in flight at once; there seemed to be a thousand of them; to Uncle Tom and Simon, smothering in a veritable Red Sea of tomatoes, gasping in a high and dashing tidal wave of tomatoes, swept to the rear before a wide besom of tomatoes, there probably seemed to be a million of them. It was as though each sagging coat pocket was a bulging bottomless reservoir of tomatoes. Tomatoes arched high, describing parabolas, and descended with moist splashing sounds. Tomatoes whizzed like scarlet meteors, each spraying behind it a tail of seeds and oozy juices. It was impossible for any bombardier to fail of a perfect percentage of hits, because if he missed either or both of his chosen targets he scored on the scenery or on some confused and milling member of the orchestra. Even a scientist might have been hard put to say offhand whether the last luckless musician, scuttling up over the footlights and fleeing in behind the wings, whither his splattered



mates already had flown, belonged to the animal or the vegetable kingdom.

Through years yet to come, a heavy-jowled dog of the mastiff breed—for all proper Siberian Blood Hounds are really mastiffs—made his home at Farrell Brothers' livery stable. He took up his exile there after he learned that in the hurry of departure for more northerly latitudes, when tents were being struck willy-nilly and equipment was being thrown aboard train topsy-turvy, his professional associates had overlooked and forgotten him. He had the ponderous wrinkled brow, the pendulous flappy dewlap, the morose and brooding eye of his kind. But he seemed even more melancholy than nature originally had intended he should be. He had due cause for his melancholy—he was that loneliest of maroons, a veteran trouper, born to troupng and bred up to it, now abandoned in uncongenial and semi-rustic surroundings, far remote from chance of intercourse with his own sort.

True, at Farrell Brothers', where he was kindly cared for and made a pet of, he had infrequent contact with visiting representatives of auxiliary branches of the great amusement sphere from which he had been separated and cut off. Bill-posting crews for circuses and minstrel shows outfitted there; medicine shows drove up to bait and bed their stock; managers of itinerant repertoire companies playing week-stands stopped in for conferences, since Mr. Sid Farrell, senior member of the firm, also was lessee of St. Clair Hall; in county-

fair time, concessionaries and privilege men and occasionally the barkers for store-pitches and street-rackets made the stable their loafing place in off hours.

When such persons appeared, the castaway would approach them, whiffing for scents and tentatively wagging his tail. Hope, for the moment, would rekindle the ashes of his somber eye. He would sniff at their heels; then mournfully return to his hermitage in a rear box-stall and lie down, his heavy head upon his stretched forepaws. He had been disappointed once more. These transients were of his world; at least, they were of one of its neighbor-worlds. He could tell that much. And they spoke one to another in the familiar patois of his own people, or in a tongue closely resembling it. But they were not Uncle Tommers; they didn't have the right smell.

## *Chapter XXIX*

EXIT GRUB, ENTER BUTTERFLY

IT was past time for supper when Juney got home. He was all dusty and hot and feeling a trifle fagged out after his unhallowed service with the regulators, but generally well-content. After supper he sat awhile with other component units of the family on the wide front verandah. His father and mother rocked in porch chairs, his father mechanically slapping a folded newspaper at buzzing winged pests, his mother fanning with a palm-leaf fan bound in edgings of black tape. His two little sisters bickered in a hammock where they were cradled; after a little they cuddled down together and fell asleep. Juney was humped in his favorite perch on the piazza's top step, watching for the first lightning-bug to show its illuminated tail-piece. The twilight closed in; then, almost with the abruptness of a snuffer blanking out a candle flame, the darkness came down and everything was pitchy black except where the fireflies danced their lantern dances under the trees. From down the street came the sounds of laughter and singing; a party of the town belles and their beaux were starting off on a hay-ride. There was an en-

hanced smell of dust in the languid air; overhead the limp leaves all hung in thick motionless clumpings; the moon wouldn't be up until pretty late tonight. There was a distant mutter of the unsubstantial heat-thunder of August.

All at once Mr. Custer broke the immediate silence. Juney jumped and stirred; for the first words proved he was to be the subject of conversation. What was coming? In advance of any accusation it behooved him to mould his alibis.

"Did you happen to notice this young man here at supper?" his father was saying. The guilty one fluttered internally. There was a gory-looking smear on the blouisiest part of his shirt-waist; he had carried his ammunition supply hidden there and it had leaked its pinkish essences on him and had soaked through the goods. But he had been flattering himself that he concealed the stain by an artful disposal of a crooked arm against his side.

"Well, for one thing, his hair certainly needed combing," said Mrs. Custer tartly.

"I wasn't thinking of that," said her husband. "All at once it's dawned on me that he's actually beginning to get taller. His legs are beginning to stick further and further out of those breeches-legs of his and here, just in the last month or so, his neck's getting a sort of a skinny, stretchy look to it, seems like. I'm glad of it. My people have always been fairly good-sized and I hated the idea of having a runt in the family—a runt not much taller than knee-high to a grasshopper, too. Maybe it's this hot weather that started to bring him

out; it's been a great season for making the saplings grow. Well, it was high time the youngster took to sprouting. Let's see, son, you'll be fourteen in about a month from now, won't you?"

"Four weeks and three days, not countin' in to-day," said Juney, much relieved.

"Huh!" grunted his father. "Getting to be particular about your sums in arithmetic, I see, where they have a personal application. Well, I suppose you're beginning to bank on what you'll get from your mother and me?"

"It's that Flobert rifle that he's been plaguing both of us about for I don't know how long," stated Mrs. Custer, before Juney could say anything. "His mind just seems to be set on it. Now what possesses children to want such dangerous things, is a thing I'll never understand if I live to be a thousand. Why can't he be satisfied with something that he can't hurt himself with or kill himself with? Why, if he had a loaded rifle I know I'd never sleep another wink in peace. Why, only just here the other day I was reading in the paper about——"

"Don't fret yourself, Helena; I'm not going to let him have a rifle." Juney's mouth drooped at the corners. "But I've about decided that along in the fall, when the game law goes off, I might invest on his account in a light single-barrel shot-gun."

The corners of the mouth came up and stretched in a joyful grin.

"Oh, pop, shore 'nuff—a twelve-gauge britch-loader?"

"That's the general idea. I've got my eye on one down at Hart's—eight dollars is the price, with a cleaning-rod and a set of loading tools thrown in for good measure.

"But John!" cried Mrs. Custer, "a shot-gun at his age—now I know I wouldn't sleep!"

"You don't understand the difference in fire-arms," explained her husband. "If he's going to shoot himself or somebody else it'd be better to have him sprinkling them with bird-shot out of a cylinder-bored fusee than putting a hole clear through them with a solid chunk of lead. You can't expect to keep on keeping him in the baby class forever. What say, son, if on the opening day you and I go out yonder in the country somewheres and see if between us we can't massacre a feeble-minded old Miss Molly Har'? I'd like to be along with my own boy when he plugs his first cotton-tail—by gum, I would!"

For the time-being the boy was speechless. But he leveled an imaginary fowling-piece and aimed and fired it, and all, over the yard the slain game dropped; squirrels, ducks, rabbits, partridges, wild turkeys and one deer—a terrific slaughter.

He twisted about then and stared through the darkness, trying to make out his father's face. He had now, all in a rush, a new feeling about his father—a curious kind of grown-up, comradely feeling.

A woman must mother the creature she loves or the creature for which she has compassion, whether it be a child or a bird or a lap-dog, a cat, a husband



or a beggar-man. But when a man's soul opens out and warms to someone else he does, regardless of difference in age or condition, make a crony of that other—a confidante, perhaps, but certainly a chum of sorts. If his own offspring is in question he must sooner or later sink the paternal attitude into the fraternal, else the pair of them swing apart instead of drawing nearer.

And in this very moment Juney, without consciously analyzing the matter, somehow knew that the great gulf which heretofore had seemed to intervene between him and this dad of his had moved to close itself up. He no longer was looking up and across it to the immensely higher farther edge of it where parents abided. He was seeing his father eye-to-eye on kindred levels and seeing him thus, his father was no longer all and entirely the father. Why, he was more like an older brother—a brother who was beginning at last to understand things and who would go on understanding them. It was—well, it was just hunkadory—that's what it was!

And it was getting to be hunkadorier every second, that passed, for by his next words the new partner was proceeding to justify the new faith the younger partner had in him.

"But look here, you-all. We're getting off the track. This shot-gun business has got nothing to do with the birthday blow-out." In their eager rapture Juney's ears twitched. "How about it, kid? Suppose, just for instance now, that on the morning you're fourteen the two of us—and nobody else—

took a short walk down to Felsburg's Oak Hall Clothing store and picked out a new suit for you—a long-pants suit!”

The boy let out a quavering whoop of ecstasy—the Indian's scalping call.

“Junior, hush that,” commanded his mother. “You'll rouse the whole neighborhood.” She addressed the elder colleague: “Now, John, you know he's not old enough or big enough either to be wearing grown-up things yet!”

“What's the reason he's not? He's old enough, and if he keeps on climbing the way he's started just recently he'll be big enough too, in about four weeks and three days and a fraction. Besides, it's time I cut him loose from the apron strings—I'm not forgetting those crazy duds you tried to saddle on him here in the spring. I thought to myself then it was about time somebody stepped in and saved the poor youngster. No, suzz, we're going to have our say about what we wear from now on, eh, boy?”

“You betcher! Oh, say, pop, you mean a reg'lar long-pants suit with a vest and all?”

“Of course.”

“And—and suspenders?”

“Absolutely. I guarantee the suspenders. Felsburg always throws in a pair, or else a necktie.”

“But I did so want to keep him a boy a little while longer!”

Neither of the males present heeded her. Their joint wills were working in perfect unison and not missing a beat.

"And, oh, pop, will you git me some shore-'nuff men's shirts like the kind you wear—you know, with a stiff front to 'em and you pull 'em on over your head and they've got those little dewdabs, with buttonholes, down where the stiff part leaves off?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth. Such a shirt would be great for Sunday wear."

"And some reg'lar stand-up men's collars that you put 'em on and take 'em off sep-rate?"

"Still you read my mind. I was just thinking about those collars."

"Well, then, I'll git the celluloid kind—they're shinier and you kin notice 'em further off."

Mrs. Custer rose up. She had the conviction that she was being baffled, circumvented, conspired against. And she had it right—she was.

"Well," said the offended lady, "if I'm not going to be allowed to even express my views about all this tom-foolery I might as well be getting those babies yonder in bed." She sniffed loudly as she went to the hammock to rouse her small daughters.

Juney sat in his place after she was gone, hugging his bare knees. It was strange, but he was not thinking of the pleasant excitement which would be occasioned in the collective minds of his gang—Earwigs Erwin and Clabe Lanier and Bubber Ferguson and the rest—on his dedicatory appearance in his first long pants. The strange thing was that he should be trying to visualize the reactions of Milly Hollander. Somehow Milly Hollander and the initialed heart he had that morning carved on the big water-maple down on Jefferson Street were

concerned with and mixed up in his present exquisite musings. His father bent forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Well, let's go to bed, old man. Even if you are getting to be almost fourteen you needn't be staying up all night."

They went indoors, each with an arm about the other.

Alone in his room, and half-undressed, Juney found himself swivelling before the looking glass above the washstand. The Narcissistic mood was a new mood for him. Up to now, his own mirrored reflection had not been particularly entrancing. He turned this way and that, studying effects over his shoulder. He was holding a preliminary rehearsal. He was picturing the hang of the coat, the dudish fit of the vest, the sweep, unbroken to the ankles, of those new trousers that were to be.

Midway of a slow swing of his body, he checked. On his breast his eye caught the gleam of a thing pale but sharp, a minute thing that silvered in the gaslight like a fine short pencilled line. He stared at it, touched it with a finger-nail, made it move. There could be no mistake about it—he had hair growing on his chest. One hair, anyhow.

"Hod zickertee!"

Something curious happened to the latter word. The *hod* part came out in the usual treble but the middle syllable of the *zickertee* was thicker and deeper, as though a stranger with a baritone rumble in his throat had interrupted him. He tried it again and again his voice broke.

He finished undressing, put on his nightshirt, turned off the gas and crawled into bed, tucking the mosquito bar in behind him. He had meant to lie awake for hours and hours and think great thoughts.

But almost immediately he was off. When the tardy moon climbed above the trees in the side yard it poured its skimmed-milk shafts in at the window by the bed. One persistent beam sifted through the netting and shone upon the sleeping boy's naked flesh. Purposely he had left his night-shirt open at the throat and turned back for all the way down the front. He was giving the summer air, which was reputed as so good for making young things sprout, a chance at the hair on his chest.













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